

Buddhist Perspectives
on
Strategies
for
Sustainable Development

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A perspective: try to help decision-makers

In a sense, sustainable development is very difficult. It's a systems thing. You have to keep balancing environmental, social and economic factors. Any intervention is apt to have unanticipated repercussions. Interest groups will fight their corners. Experts will be on hand to support any argument.

But in the end that's trivial. Come down to it, sustainable development is easy. Not to say we can ever be certain that we will ward off eco-doom. Still, what we have to do, to give ourselves a chance, is crystal-clear – and it is perfectly doable.

So:

- ◆ The alternatives are catastrophic.
- ◆ The difficulties of a sensible remedial programme are manageable.
- ◆ Still the human species does, effectively, nothing.

What have we here? A very Buddhist problematic! First line of the Dhammapada:

Mind goes ahead; qualities of experience follow. Mind is their best and leader; they are made of mind. Say a person speaks or acts with a mind that is turbulent and cloudy. Suffering follows, as the wheel follows the ox's hoof.

The destruction we are visiting upon our external habitat is just the outward and visible symbol of the destruction of our internal environment, our psychological habitat, our inner world.

As we recognise our difficulty in responding to the gravity of our situation, our immediate reaction is to focus yet more urgently, indeed obsessively, on externals. Do we need small, densely packed cities; an eco-dictator; nuclear power; an Office of Expectations Management; hydrogen-powered cars; the reinstatement of slavery; or what? Answer, none of the above. That is just digging more vigorously at the hole we are already in. The hole consists in our conditioned repression of direct experience. We need to stop looking for something outside of us that will make it all better and instead to start paying attention to our inner lives.

From the beginning of industrialisation, everybody knew the results were problematic. The mill owners and iron masters built their houses well out of sight of the industrial townscape and filled them with idealised images of nature. They still do...

Now, in the so-called third wave economy, the big winners hug their stress symptoms to their bosoms as tokens of their elect status. All across society, we are perfectly aware, underneath, that the way we live is doing us no good.

Yet, somehow, we are able to rise above our pain. We trail clouds of anomie, family breakdown, addiction... yet carry on regardless. Why? Because we are convinced that only measurable realities, in the autonomous, external world, are significant. The subjective domain is random and arbitrary and on no account to be taken seriously. If I experience loving-kindness, that is just two chemicals interacting in my brain.

A philosopher might say we are in the grip of a metaphysical delusion. More to the point, we are prey to a set of interlocking psychological automatisms that spin us round, looping endlessly, samsarically, from catastrophe to modified rapture and back again.

So, a valid Buddhist perspective on sustainable development is to say it all begins with a sustainable pattern of experience, a sustainable psychology. That gives us the beginnings of a strategy. To minimise environmental damage, we need to improve the mental and spiritual well-being of the decision-making groups in the organisations whose decisions generate such damage.

How do we do that? Let's be realistic here: we're not too likely to get all these people meditating soon. Given where they are in their heads right now, it may take some time to reach that goal.

Drop by drop the bowl fills up. Let's aim for some partial results to begin with.

We need to use skill in means here. Tell people things they think they might want to hear.

So what are corporate decision-makers ready to hear? What do they talk about? How great they are, yes; and also what problems they face, and how they can face them.

There must be an opening here for us to stimulate in such groups a collective process akin to the cultivation of mindfulness in an individual.

- ◆ How to find that opening? A good Buddhist approach is to work on ourselves.

If we want to persuade these organisations and people, we can't be confrontational. So we have to resolve our own issues first.

- ◆ Equally, it's no good trying to run away from what is actually happening. We have to address the crisis as it presents itself. We're not the only ones who can see it: the decision-makers we are dealing with are looking at it too. So, by examining our own experience, we should be able to see what will work for them, to stimulate in them a useful process of reflection. This will be a valid contribution to finding a new way forward.

A strategy: let us reframe the world

WE CAN SEE PAST THE BAD IN THE BAD GUYS

THE BUDDHA MANAGED IT. SO WE CAN TOO

The prospects for life on this planet are not great. Why?

We can say it is all down to the bad guys – the greed-mongers, the power-addicted, the manic and possessed. Of course not everyone in a corporate hierarchy is like that. In my experience, many are dull and stolid; some are really pretty good people who try to help the world move forward in a positive way; and a few are... well, victims in their own way, and at the same time (yes, sorry), mad and bad.

These are the people who push through the decisions that kill forests and rivers; who prefer to mess up the atmosphere rather than risk their precious power and profit. So, it's true, in a way: the bad guys are doing us in.

Only, where does that leave us? Upset and angry! Looking for a way to get back at them! The trouble with that is: we'll end up trying to beat the bad guys at their own game. We'll betray our own purposes. We'll become as screwed up as they are.

The Buddha didn't disagree with people. The world might disagree with him, but he wasn't going to reciprocate, let alone confront anyone. Having extinguished the fires, he kept his cool. It's a hard act to follow. That's what makes it worthwhile.

DEAL WITH ANGER STAGE BY STAGE!

FIRST WE CAN WORK ON OURSELVES

Continuing anger is no good for us. Suppressing anger is no good either.

The point isn't: not to be angry. If you're angry, you're angry. Deal with it. That's the point. Anger is not helpful; the challenge of dealing with it may be.

Dealing with it doesn't mean: no longer paying attention to what is wrong, or no longer wishing to do something about it. It means getting yourself into a state where, if the opportunity arises, you can do something *effective* about it.

Some little boys pull the wings off flies: Hitler, for instance, so we're told. It would have been good if someone had done something effective about that.

What would have been effective? Yelling at the little boy, or hitting him – surely not! But then, nor would it have been helpful to radiate bliss and gently upbraid.

Consider the Buddha. The Vinaya is a collection of stories about the Buddha getting cross with people. "Mogha purisa!", he often says: "You stupid man!" Now, we know this is not anger – not in the sense of *krodha/kodha*, a negative emotion. But suppose someone who knew nothing of the background were to have witnessed the episode in the Alagadduupama Sutta where the Buddha rebukes Ari.t.tha. What would they have said? Perhaps that the Buddha was angry with him. Anyhow, the Buddha was definitely exercised.

The little boy pulling the wings off flies is projecting outward a pain he feels inside, so as to distance himself from it. For him to learn better, the first requirement is

that he connect properly with his own pain. He will be open to help only from someone who can show him how to do that – to live his pain positively. That won't be someone who smiles beatifically. It'll be someone who's obviously deeply moved and at the same time governed by strong compassion.

So the point is to transmute the psychological energy commonly known as anger into something positive – tough, active compassion. Withdrawing and sitting quietly helps us to do that. If we take time out to work on ourselves, we will work more effectively in the world.

PRACTISE GOODWILL (METTA) TO SEE THEY'RE LIKE US AT BOTTOM

This is how we are able to focus our goodwill on to those “bad guys”. That is, we understand how they get to be that way: the traps of thinking and feeling they fall into. Yes, their case may be extreme, and at the same time these are traps we know. We, the unenlightened, do fall into them – all of us.

That does not mean we are in some way essentially bad, and so have to distrust ourselves. No: that is a blind alley; it has a lot to do with the mess humanity is in.

CONTEMPLATE UNKNOWING (AVIDYAA) TO SEE WHERE THEY GO WRONG

The Buddhist tradition suggests, instead, that the problem is avidyaa – not so much ignorance perhaps as ‘unknowing’, when awareness is blocked. Existence goes wrong for us when we're not communicating with ourselves.

Across the world these days, we are not communicating well, with ourselves or each other. So, we are acting in ways that frustrate our own fundamental tendencies and characteristics, hurting ourselves and each other.

Things are going wrong. That means they can also go right. People fall into traps; people climb out again. Realising where we go wrong is the first step.

Avidyaa is something people do. We're not talking about something people are, i.e. essentially, irremediably bad, evil.

No, it's not that the bad guys are doing us in. No, stupidity and laziness is running away with us all, and we, collectively, are in danger of doing ourselves in.

CONTEMPLATE EMPTINESS (SUÑÑATAA) TO NOT GET STUCK ON IDEAS

Thinking ‘we’ are bad or ‘they’ are bad locks us in to a sense of frustration and anger. Words like ‘good’ and ‘bad’ don't apply like that, absolutely.

Words generally don't apply absolutely. Words stand for concepts, not for things that exist absolutely. Concepts are ultimately void – suñña. Nothing exists absolutely – or nothing we can say much about, anyhow.

THEN WE CAN WORK ON THE WORLD: REFRAME IT

So, that's the baseline that we always come back to. Clear the heart and mind of turbulence.

Then what? Once we're clear – or clearer, anyway – we can get back to the original question. How to react to the murder of the planet?

Here is an opportunity to use what clarity of mind we have been able to muster. If we think through the issues carefully, we should be able to reframe them appropriately.

For instance, executives from the polluting corporation will say they have no option: they have to make a profit; that's how the economy works, (to everyone's benefit, they say). Protesters are likely to agree: it's all down to the profit motive. Only, they will draw a another conclusion: the economy has to work differently. Stop the world, I want to get off.

The Buddhist approach is to ask, what is this 'profit'? It's a word, just an empty word. The point is: how are we using it? How best to use it?

Anyone who puts out effort wants to see something coming back. In a cash economy – and there's no other economy available, sorry – an organisation has to run a surplus, or it doesn't run for long. The question is: what sort of profit? How is it generated? What happens to the people involved, in the organisation and outside, as the surplus is created? What happens after that, as a result of the way it was created? How is it then used?

So it's not: profit or not. That's not the issue. It's: what profits, what for?

That is reframing the issue. That's the sort of thing we have to do.

As a species, we humans are radically diminishing the capacity of our planet to sustain life. We know it, and we're doing next to nothing about it. Clearly, we need to reframe our issues. That is a precise and urgent requirement for us.

It's also good Buddhist work. It helps us further in moving through and beyond anger, into compassion and equanimity. It is essential in working towards the goal that all beings should be well and happy.

ACTIVE GOODWILL IS TOUGH-MINDED

In sum: the basic Buddhist position is non-confrontational; that does not mean it is passive. The Buddha actively opposed the orthodoxy of his day. He lost no opportunity to point out its follies. He made fun of it, not always gently.

So we want to be wary of sentimentalising our non-violent commitment. That way, we turn it into something quite different – a comfort blanket for our impotence.

Indeed, that is a common perception of the Buddhist approach: that it combines sound analysis with the best of intentions and ends up totally ineffectual. And perceptions do tend to reflect some underlying truth. We may be so concerned to avoid getting trapped in fear and anger that we no longer work for all beings to be well and happy. The point is: cultivating calm and insight is a way to live better; living better, we will naturally experience goodwill and compassion; that experience will express itself in positive action; and positive action means engaging with things as they are.

COMBAT PRAPAÑCA TO RETHINK MODERNITY

Take: business. Economic activity reflects the language that economically active people use. The conceptual universe of business tends to lock us in to a narrow thought-world. That is the power of ideology.

The Buddhist tradition tells us about that. Conceptual systems take on a life of their own: this is prapañca/papañca or proliferation. It's a disease; the analysis of emptiness is the remedy.

Then we can get on to the real work. That is to reconceptualise economics in a way that stops us slipping into automatic patterns of psychological and physical behaviour, driven by greed and fear.

We need a Buddhist take on economic life. That's not to say we can derive a new economics from the texts of the tradition. What the tradition is for is to help us become the people who can rethink economics.

What sort of people would that be? People who can understand and use what is useful in economics without falling into the traps.

Which are? Well, there's the familiar economic determinism that says what people do and even the way we are is an automatic reflection of our economic circumstances and activity. Then there's also the idea that an economy is like a machine, which works only the way it was designed, so there is only one way for societies to achieve prosperity, which is untrammelled competition to maximise profits and so deliver shareholder value. Let's look at that.

COMPETITION

Take the word 'competition'. It generally combines two quite distinct ideas.

- ◆ There is the idea of trying to do better all the time, to improve the product, to enhance service quality, to satisfy needs and so generate the resources to support further beneficial economic activity.
- ◆ Competition can also mean devising neat contracts that lock the customer in. It means predatory pricing to squeeze out smaller competitors. It means transfer price manipulation and other devices to reduce tax payments. At the top level, it means seeking long term control of resources; it means central banking as an extension of war, manipulating credit creation and capital flows for exploitative ends. That is competition too, and it is nothing like the beneficial force defined in standard descriptions of the perfect market.

The accepted language and conceptual system, theorised in the universities and practised in the corporate suites, blurs such distinctions. It has served to confuse people generally, to trap the collective mind and spirit in an illusion that perpetuates the cycle of ever-accelerating conflict. It is this cycle which unites our two themes – world peace and sustainable development.

THERE IS NO ANSWER. SO WHAT?

THE SEARCH FOR AN ANSWER PARALYSES ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION

Or again, take: 'problem-solving'. When people begin to understand the threat that our species is posing to itself, they often react by saying: "OK, so what's the answer?" They want to know *the right* way to achieve a *provably* sustainable pattern of global development, *the right* policy moves, *the right* implementation processes that will, in a limited period, produce *the right* result and make eco-doom go away.

The assumption is that nothing can happen until there is an agreed process for resolving this whole issue that's scientifically proven to work perfectly. It paralyses us.

SOME PROBLEMS ARE CONVERGENT. THE BIGGEST AREN'T.

Indeed, that whole pattern of thinking has a lot to do with how we came to be in this fix in the first place. We – particularly policy-makers – don't want to do anything unless and until the goal we wish to achieve is clearly defined, and so is the method we will follow. This purposive behaviour has much to commend it when we must meet particular, short-term challenges. The trouble is that, in

persuading and training ourselves to apply it consistently and effectively, we have exaggerated its importance.

We have assumed that only this approach is ever acceptable in any situation. This is quite remarkable when you come to think of it. Even hard science doesn't work that way. Consider computer programming. Most of the problems we use computers for are convergent: that is, there is one correct, complete solution, and only one. So, most programs are algorithmic: to produce that correct output from a given set of inputs, we need to define a series of rules and to ensure these rules are applied in an appropriate order; we need an algorithm. Then, you feed in the input conditions and the answer is output, plop, just like that.

But, not all problems have a single, demonstrably right solution. In fact, the most important ones don't. Say we want to build a flood barrier on a river estuary. Once we know how much water we need to displace, there is an engineering problem of finding the cheapest, most effective way to do that. That is a convergent problem with an algorithmic solution. But first we must decide what that problem is. How much water might need to be displaced? How fast might it build up? In what directions might it be displaced? Now and in 100 years time? There is no provable right solution to that.

Yet we can model the situation and find useful ways of thinking it through, on a computer or in the head. We can use a different kind of programming. Here, we are not looking for precise rules that we know will get us to exactly where we want to go. After all, what we are trying to find out here is where we want to go! Still we can usefully develop some broad guidelines for what options to test, and how to check the results we get. In such-and-such a situation, try this sort of approach – and evaluate what comes out by these-and-those measures. “Crossing the river, feel for the stones”, as Deng Xiao-Ping said. If you teach a computer to do that, it's called heuristic programming.

Currently, we humans are trapped in a pattern of instrumental, algorithmic thinking. It is very good for short-term problems. It is useless for larger, longer-term questions. Indeed, it can be absolutely counterproductive. If – as has happened – we become locked in to this way of thinking, it prevents us from taking account of long-term factors that we cannot yet pin down precisely. So we carry on with our existing pattern of economic development regardless of the ultimate consequences.

The basic requirement is to feel confident enough to go forward without being able to prove in advance that what we are doing will get us to where we want to be. We need to trust ourselves; we need the courage to 'put our heart' into sustainable development; we need 'sradddhaa/saddhaa.

Going forward: what to support & promote

WHAT TO SUPPORT

We just need to take our life in our hands and move forward positively. If we can do that, it's clear where to focus our efforts.

- ◆ We can favour public transport over private transport and low-energy buildings over high-energy buildings.
- ◆ We can increase decentralised power generation.
- ◆ We can factor in externalities; industrial companies need to measure and reduce their carbon footprints, their waste et cetera.
- ◆ We can pass legislation to ensure that industrial products have a disposal cost which diminishes the more use has been derived from them: a car that is junked after a million kilometres should cost less to dispose of than one scrapped after a hundred thousand kilometres.
- ◆ Then, as the new legislation developing in Europe has it, all packaging must be returnable to the retail outlet where it was bought, which must have a responsibility, factored into the cost, for recycling it.

There is a lot that we could be doing: very much more than what we are doing. How to explain our paralysis?

Big corporations normally have fairly secure franchises. They will make reasonable profits come what may, provided they do nothing really stupid. So why is so much concern and goodwill producing so little progress? Clearly, we are not in control of our actions.

It's one of those situations where you can know what to do and not be able to do it. We all know these from our personal lives.

- ◆ I must tidy my files. I know exactly what must happen and the result that I'm looking for. I simply can't get myself together to do it.
- ◆ Or again, recent events have left my team demoralised, although, on a long view, things aren't looking too bad. So, I must raise their morale. I must spend time among them and smile and give encouragement. But knowing that I must smile doesn't help me to smile. My son's not talking to me, my daughter's over-spending, I'm not sleeping that well – and I have to smile!

This is where the algorithmic approach breaks down. The most important things in life you can't do just because you want to and know how. Something else is necessary. A certain quality of experience, a certain dharma, so to say. This is where the Buddhist contribution is clearly going to be of value. It's about coming to terms with direct experience.

WHAT TO PROMOTE

It will be helpful if that dharmic reality becomes more apparent to more people. So we want to promote policy initiatives that will take us in that direction.

EXTEND THE AUDIT

Here is one. It is about Environmental Health and Safety Audits.

Mindfulness does not start by determining a goal or end-state that it seeks to produce; rather it assumes that a person will come spontaneously to an understanding of how they need and are able to change – if only they can manage to give good attention to what is going on in themselves currently. The basis for progress is simply to look at what is happening in oneself clearly. Then, the process will spontaneously evolve in a new and more positive direction. The analogous procedure at the level of a collective entity has to be something like an audit.

When ecological concerns started to acquire some weight in the public discourse, the first practical steps to improve things centred on environmental assessment. Someone who wants to build a dam always had to do a lot of research: the geology, the engineering, the logistics, the market for the electricity or the tax base to cover the cost of water supplies, whatever. Now it became necessary to add an environmental impact assessment.

By stages, the same procedure was extended from individual projects to continuing business operations. Large corporations now routinely undertake Environmental, Health & Safety (EHS) audits and mention their results in the annual report. This principle could be extended.

Consider how decisions are taken. Papers are produced and meetings held in elevated, air-conditioned offices in corporate headquarters. Suppose a decision will have severely adverse environmental impacts down the line: rivers will be polluted and two-headed babies born, forest cover denuded and villages starved, whatever. Those effects may never be mentioned in the papers and in the meeting rooms. Nonetheless they will, in most cases, be understood by most of the participants, however vaguely. In mumbled conversations at the water cooler, in sudden reflections that intrude upon the mind at inconvenient moments, people will be aware that their collective action is going to visit measureless suffering upon many.

At a conscious level, they are likely to suppress this awareness with the thought that it's nothing to do with them, this is how the big machine works, market forces cannot be denied and it will all come out in the wash. Adam Smith or someone told us that the pursuit of shareholder value is the straight road to the greatest good of the greatest number.

At the experiential level, these people know they are involved in creating great pain for other human beings. Anyone who does that has got to be deeply distressed in themselves. So, if they are doing a health audit anyway, it is reasonable that they should capture that effect too. If large corporations were annually to audit their people's psychological health and report the results, it could have a significant effect.

There would be two ways to do this: to measure input or output, psychological conditions or behavioural patterns.

- ♦ Start with behavioural patterns. It would be helpful for any organisation to know what proportion of the management group works 70-80, 60-70 hours per week et cetera; what proportion consumes how many units of alcohol per week; what proportion is unmarried, in a first marriage, second marriage, third marriage...; what proportion still talk to their children et cetera.

- ◆ When it comes to psychological conditions, there are tests to identify sub-clinical depression, borderline Aspergers syndrome, mild neurosis, sex addiction, exercise addiction and so on. Many people who fall within the definition of psychologically normal and indeed may well, by conventional standards, be making a great success of their lives, are nonetheless confused and psychologically distressed. Tests can reveal that.

Here is a Buddhist perspective on how an organisation can gain control of its behaviour and hence be able to limit its environmental depredations. Corporations should undertake a psychological audit every year and report the results.

INVESTMENT INITIATIVES

People who have investable fund at their disposal can make a significant difference to economic development patterns. Ethical investment involves at the very least checking companies' behaviour and withholding support from those that engage in questionable business. More positively, an ethical investment group can offer local communities seed funding for initiatives that will allow them to generate income without degrading their environment. This is something that we can encourage wealthy people to do. There are examples to follow here. Try putting Pacific Community Ventures into Google, or Solari.

CAMPAIGNING FOR BETTER REGULATION

Let's talk about needs. The Buddhist tradition does not fall into the ascetic trap of rejecting human needs; at the same time it seeks to identify those needs carefully, to accommodate what is really needed but no more. It recognises that we are apt to create spurious needs for ourselves; it is wary of that tendency.

Today, the creation of needs is widely accepted. Indeed the economic system depends on it. This has been called the squirrel-wheel economy.

Creating needs is clearly not wise. Any Buddhist perspective must show that.

Yet there is a fair consensus in the business world that it is necessary, that the engine of the economy will cease to turn without advertising, product placement, brand management and the constant, media-induced heightening of greed, fear and confusion. This is plain wrong. It is wrong in that there are counter-examples: Sweden has run a very successful economy with tight constraints on advertising. It is wrong in that it exemplifies the delusive power of ideas (*prapañca/papañca*) – in particular its power to make us think that what is must be. It is also wrong in that its effects are clearly contrary to what they are believed to be: increasing consumption as measured in cash expenditure is supposed to enhance human happiness; anyone who has practised any sort of mindfulness can state authoritatively that is not the case. Recent economic research confirms that. Check Richard Layard in Google.

So, here perhaps, we have a valid campaign for people from a Buddhist perspective to undertake. Markets are fine; markets are, by definition, regulated; better regulations make better markets. Tight control on advertising is in everyone's long term interest.

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