

# The Middle Way for Sustainable Development Amidst Social Changes

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## ABSTRACT

The irresistible expansion of the capitalist economies has given rise to the new faith or religion of consumerism that has subsumed under its menacing grip adherents of all existing religious faiths and secular ideologies. Buddhists and non-Buddhist alike have come under its swaying control. The shift from the consumerist trend to sustainability requires profound individual and social transformations throughout the world. This paper explores the possibilities in which Buddhist principles and practices that have been applied in daily living for over 2,500 years can be applied to contemporary sustainability discourse. The paper refers to three well-known Buddhist meditation masters from the twentieth century – Ajahn Chah, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and Master Sheng Yen. The dominant technocratic approach of today includes an assumption of the inevitable impetus of technological progress

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as independent of any dhammic driving force. The effect of such myopic outlook is that throughout the world there emerged a massive disproportion between the outcomes of highly organized and intensified rationality (technological advance) and unreflected goals, rigidified and dehumanized value systems, and ego-centric ideological frameworks. The Buddhist approach, on the other hand, leaves room for a mindful and reflective exercise that can, if not completely eradicate, at least help destabilize this massive disproportion. The collected teachings of the three accomplished masters, whose profound dhamma expositions are today widely disseminated across the globe form a corpus of reflective guidelines for the cultivation of mental well-being that is not only conducive to individual holistic growth but also for sustainable development and communal spiritual health along the path set forth by the Buddha more than two millennia ago. In today's excessively consumption-oriented ambience that has had many pernicious and adverse effects on the overall mental well-being of people from every stratum of society as well as on the natural environment, their teachings and inspiration drawn from their exemplary lifestyle marked by material frugality and renunciation become highly relevant to form a collective resistance to the excessively materialistic approach to living that has resulted from a solely capitalistic mode of growth. Ajahn Chah's teachings on incorporation of mindfulness in every mode of practice and daily action and dismantling of binaries, Buddhadasa's proposal of the concepts of development of life and Dhammic Socialism, and Master Sheng Yen's teachings on Chan (Zen) as a way of life are not only profound at the spiritual level but have practical applicability for sustainable development amidst rapid socio-economic and cultural changes.

Keywords: Buddhist sustainable development, holistic growth, consumerism, spiritual health

## INTRODUCTION

Consumption for the sake of consumption has become habitually normative in this age of globalized market economy. Some Buddhist

scholars have observed, “We need to realize that consumerism functions as a religion for a rapidly increasing number of people worldwide”.<sup>1</sup> Transforming consumption patterns have fundamentally affected the human psyche and society, buttressing the materialistic focus of the social desirability bias. Mass production of goods and rapid proliferation of marketing avenues, advertising, and social media networks have played a decisive role in the circulation, popularization, and resultant use and overuse of finished products in day to day life with little temporal and psycho-spatial room left for the consumers to pause and think about the toll the entire process has had left on their own psyche and the natural environment. While aggrandizement of material wealth has rendered human existence shallow and self-centered, serious matters such as global warming, pollution, deforestation, etc have become clichés and are given only lip service both amidst the circles of specialists as well as the indifferent policy-makers. Human beings have become like robotic toys in their own hands endlessly dancing to the tune of a mechanical form of desire-formation (*rupa tanha*), since the entire process of production-consumption functions within an interlocked chain that easily sidetracks the mind’s ability to tease this dual-interlocking apart. As the social thinker, Baudillard who sought to interrogate the relationship among reality, symbols, and society once pointed out –“the more exponential the marketing of images is growing the more fantastically grows the indifference towards the real world. Finally, the real world becomes a useless function, a collection of phantom shapes and ghost events.”<sup>2</sup> The situation being such it seems rather paradoxical to toss the topic of sustainability at all. But being a person engaged in the teaching career, I felt the urge to battle through this paradoxical situation and produce something fruitful to think of and act upon. As usual the inspiration to do so has been derived from the teachings of the Buddha and a few of his elegant contemporary monastic disciples. I call them elegant

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1. Jonathan Watts & David Loy, 1998.03 ‘The Religion of Consumption: A Buddhist Perspective’ Think Sangha Thematic Section: Consumption and Sustainable Development v. 41 n. 1 pp. 61-66, available online at [www.ccbs.ntu.edu.tw](http://www.ccbs.ntu.edu.tw).

2. Jean Baudillard “The Violence of the Image” 2002 posted on the website of The European Graduate School [www.egs.edu](http://www.egs.edu).

because when we delve into their timeless teachings, rays of hopes seem to emerge, which if made to spread over the darker spots of so-called development can in a way, I believe, stimulate interested people (Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike) to help bring a halt in the dynamics of mechanized development that has left the planet Earth physically and spiritually scorched ever since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution.

Although the concept of sustainability is inherent in every religious tradition of the world, the term in its current usage first became prominent in the international arena in the 1980s when the Brundtland Commission enunciated its vision of the path to sustainability and referred to it as ‘sustainable development’. The concept was founded on the idea of perpetual economic growth as the solution to environmental and social problems. Due to the impact of rapid capitalistic mode of growth around the world, the United Nations’ initial discourse on sustainability inevitably ran parallel to the one proposed by the Brundtland Commission. However, due to massive depletion of environment and unbridled use of natural resources that has drastically affected climatic changes, the United Nations, in its role as one of the most prestigious global organizations, was bound to feel the pressing needs for environmental protection and restoration. Thus, in order to cope with these changes that have had a global impact, the UN has been continually reformulating and expanding upon its goals to a considerable extent. But still it has not yet fundamentally revised or revamped its foundational premise of economic growth as the solution for social problems and has continued to operate very much along the lines set by the developed nations’ expectations and agenda of progress and change. So it is pertinent to look at the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and their implementation from the Buddhist, or for that matter from any other religious or an ethicist, perspective.

The common definitional understanding of sustainability or sustainable development vis-à-vis economic growth is quite contrary to the Buddhist way of looking at both the terms. According to Buddhism, sustainability or sustainable development stands for the enrichment of human life with a deepened understanding of holistic well being, which

is divorced from simplistic ideas such as economic effluence, material accumulation, and sensual gratification. While the general discourse on sustainability functions in a linear way almost always prioritizing development at the external domain, Buddhism, on the other hand, incorporates both the mental and physical contexts and follows a holistic pattern of development that encompasses both mental and physical as well as individual and communal realms. The Buddhist discourse on sustainability has a conceptual linking to the Buddha's perfection of generosity, self-sacrifice and contentment in his penultimate birth as Prince Vessantara, the Bodhisattva, before attaining Enlightenment in his final birth as the Buddha. The perfection of generosity (*dana*) clearly depicts the emphasis laid in Buddhism on the much-cherished quality of non-accusation of material wealth solely for one's own sake and for sensual pleasure and indulgence. Underneath this stance is the glowing element of sharing and self-sacrifice for the well being of others. The Bodhisattva's giving-away of the magical rain-inducing white elephant for the sake of helping the drought-stricken denizens of Kalinga is symbolic of the concept of sustenance of communal sustainability even at the cost of individual loss and suffering. Corresponding to this sense of self-sacrifice is the inherent urge of Prince Siddhartha to abandon all palatial wealth and comfort in the search for an answer to end human suffering. Thus, deeply embedded in Buddhism is not just the concept of personal sustainable development but communal sustainability as well. While both are conterminous, sustainability at the collective or outer level cannot be achieved without the individual or inner effort. Hence, Buddhist discourse on sustainability proceeds from the individual level to the communal level and not vice versa like the general discourse on sustainability highlighted by the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) with a focal and prioritizing attention on economic growth assumed to be filtered down to individual well-being. At the most fundamental level, Buddhist sustainable development emphasizes on transformation taking place at the individual level or inner ecology along the path set forth in the Noble Eightfold Path (*ariya-aṭṭhaṅgika-magga*) or the three-fold training of morality (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*) before it is acted out

or stretched to the collective domain. Highlighting the potentials of Buddhism to instigate profound personal and social transformations that could lead to a sustainable world, in this paper we investigate the potential for self-transformation that reside in the teachings of three great masters – Ajahn Chah, Buddhadasa, and Master Sheng Yen.

### **AJAHN CHAH'S TEACHINGS ON MINDFULNESS AND DISMANTLING OF BINARIES**

Ajahn Chah (1918-1992) who belonged to the Thai-Isan Forest Tradition is today considered as one of the most outstanding meditation masters of the Theravada lineage. His numerous dhamma talks attest to the truth that he developed and adhered to a life's philosophy that was based on 'letting go' brought into experiential realization through a constant effort at watching the workings of the mind closely through mindfulness practice. According to him, "Mindfulness is life. Whenever we don't have mindfulness, when we are heedless, it's as if we are dead."<sup>3</sup> Through a self-introspective and reflective understanding of the workings of the inner mindscape, the fleeting nature of various moods and emotions, desires and intentions are made to recognize and deal with through the internalization of the characteristic of impermanence, suffering and non-substantiality that runs through all of them. At the rudimentary level, the mindfulness training is indispensable to extricate all defilements and egocentric desires that bombard the human mind incessantly. Regular practice of it helps develop a clean and calm disposition that can bring sustainable development initially at the personal level and gradually at the collective domain when the practice becomes a natural part of life of many people in society.

At quite another level, one that is rather deep and involves reflective understanding, Ajahn Chah's teachings point towards a rigorous deconstructive mode of practice that gives rise to a practical discourse of annihilation of the ego and the resultant mindful understanding of any state of 'being' (both mental and physical) as it-is-in-itself. This

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3. Ajahn Chah, *A Taste of Freedom* 2006 (Bangkok: Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University Press), p.2.

mode of practice is an empirical deconstruction that neither valorizes the ‘written’ text nor any logical syllogism, but renders the practice a moment-to-moment phenomenal and empirical garb without at the same time erecting a ‘mega-narrative’ of the self-at-practice. This is possible because critically reflective Buddhist deconstruction creates the fertile ground for a form of self-introspective practice or scrutiny that goes hand in hand with moral practice and non-attachment to the self and the practice practiced.

The thought-provoking similes and metaphors of Ajahn Chah stimulates reflective understanding of the interdependence of all conditioned states and their inherent emptiness, and triggers the mind to confront the same reality in the immediacy of meditative and mindful awareness. What is deconstructed in the teachings of Ajahn Chah is not just language, but the human Ego itself in all its kammic dimensions – linguistic, psychological, social, ethical, and cultural garbs and orientations. In the numerous dhamma talks of this great renunciant monk of the Thai-Isan Forest Tradition, it is clearly reflected that the trained mind of a practitioner of mindfulness transcends its own ego and at a higher contemplative level proceeds to deconstruct all dualistic notions starting from the very concepts of me and mine, I and the other. As is succinctly expressed in one of his exhortations – “Give up clinging to love and hate, just rest with things as they are. That is all I do in my practice. Do not try to become anything. Do not make yourself into anything. Do not be a meditator. Do not become enlightened. When you sit, let it be. When you walk, let it be. Grasp at nothing. Resist nothing.”<sup>4</sup> Reflective understanding of this conceptual framework on the part of the UN workforce would certainly motivate its functioning in an objective and rational way, not bowing to the dictates of its permanent member countries and would enable it to mediate different processes of

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4. Jack Kornfield and Paul Breiter ed. *A Still Forest Pool – The Insight Meditation of Achaan Chah* (Illinois: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1985), p.5. All the sayings of Ajahn Chah quoted hereafter in this paper are taken from this book with emphases by the author. Subsequent reference will be made to the specific dhamma talk from the book with the corresponding page number. The above quote is from the Dhamma Talk “The Simple Path”, p.5.

sustainable development across diverse nations without giving rise to any dichotomous relations like the UN and the other, developed and underdeveloped, rich and poor, regional and global, black and white, giver and receiver, patronizer and patronized, East and West, etc. Such a stance would certainly render the UN's commitment to solve global issues like global warming, poverty, endemic diseases, etc a true humanistic garb bereft of any vested and prejudiced interest.

Given the antiquity and ubiquity of binary thought processes dominating every human discourse, it is interesting to see how in almost all of the dhamma talks binary thoughts get ceaselessly dismantled time and again. Ajahn Chah's form of teaching does not involve grandiose theory, but a form of dhamma exposition that is simple, direct yet profound at the same time. While in the arena of contemporary philosophical exposition any deconstructionist mode of critical practice engages in the practice of *neutralizing* the binary, Ajahn Chah on the other hand, stretches on undoing the entire gamut of dichotomous relations and stepping beyond that by mindfully defying reification of all mental formations, conditioned states and conventional linguistic signs, be it the written word or the verbal utterance. Thus, in his dhamma talks the dismantling of binary oppositions occurs at diversified levels – linguistic/discursive, ontological, and meditative.

The hierarchical order of binary structures tacitly promotes a first-term sequence (male/right/good) at the expense of a second-term sequence (female/left/evil) and has generally resulted in privileging of unity (albeit, superficially), identity, and temporal and spatial presence over diversity, difference, and deferment in space and time. Going against and beyond the general paradigm of polarized and dichotomous thinking, Ajahn Chah's teachings focus on the truth that all things exists only in relation to each other, not with any permanent or absolute intrinsic attribute. Through ontological deconstruction Ajahn Chah aims to focus on the practice of identifying the source and mode of one's delusion. Delusion occurs through our failure to recognize and accept the true nature of our ontological reality, which is marked by conditioned states that are constantly changing and hence are marked

by impermanence and non-substantiality. Buddhist deconstruction as put into practice by Ajahn Chah is not simply a strategic reversal of categories; it mindfully seeks to *undo* a given order of priorities and the very system of conceptual framework and discursive practice that makes that order possible. The identity of separate entities is subverted as entities are demonstrated to be inextricably involved the one in the other. He emphatically points out that when the mind does not grasp or take a vested interest, does not get caught up, things become clear. Right understanding arises from the attempt at looking very objectively at a particular situation or event and understanding it as it-is-in-itself and not coloring it with our subjective views that arise from personal likes and dislikes. This kind of an attitudinal approach, if embraced by the UN policy makers, can definitely help them function in a neutral way by instigating them to assess any region- or country-specific problem related to sustainable development within the contextual situation without having to superimpose any external patterns of development from a technologically advanced country or context.

### **BUDDHADĀSA'S TEACHINGS ON DEVELOPMENT OF LIFE AND DHAMMIC SOCIALISM**

Buddhadāsa, (1906-1993) another internationally recognized Thai monk who sought a balance between Vipassanā practice and academic, especially canonical studies, came up with great innovative thinking and re-interpretation of many core Buddhist concepts that began with his reflective understanding of the word dhamma itself, which according to him, has four meanings: i) Nature itself, ii) The law of nature, iii) The duty that must be performed according to that law of nature, and iv) The fruits or benefits that arise from the performance of that duty. He says, “We have not grasped the secret of Dhamma, so we are unable to practice in a way that gets the fullest benefit from life.”<sup>5</sup> What the word dhamma stands for in the Buddhist context could be well extended to

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5. Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, *Mindfulness with breathing* (Bangkok: The Dhamma Study & Practice Group, 1988), p. 5.

the word responsibility itself in the organizational framework of any discourse on sustainable development, in particular the UN's sustainability-oriented strategic policies. Hence, legislating its multi-faceted roles as a global organization the UN can commit itself towards sustainable development with a focus on – i) responsibility itself, ii) the nature and scope of this responsibility, iii) the work that must be undertaken according to the nature of responsibility and iv) the benefits that arise from this obligation and that which can be shared universally without any discrimination whatsoever.

Only when the above mentioned four inter-dependent nuances of dhamma are realized, the concept of developing life comes to bear true meaning. Therefore, after having clarified the four meanings of dhamma, Buddhādāsa went on to urge all his monastic and lay followers to keep in mind and consider deeply the concept of 'developing life'. According to him, developing life means "causing life to progress to the highest level beyond all problems and *dukkha*, beyond all meaning and gradations of these two words."<sup>6</sup> Thus, closely related to Buddhādāsa's exegetical understanding of the word 'dhamma' is his deeper view on developing life. He lays out four aspects of developing life. The first is to prevent things that are pernicious and unwholesome to life from arising. The second is to completely get rid of and destroy any such things that already have arisen in life. The third is to give rise to wholesome things which are useful and beneficial for life. The fourth is to maintain and preserve those things so that they flourish continually. These four aspects of developing life: preventing new dangers, getting rid of old dangers, creating desirable things, and maintaining and increasing the beneficial things are what comprises *sammāvāyāma*, or right effort that is a factor of the Noble Eightfold Path (*ariya-aṭṭhaṅgika-magga*). To Buddhādāsa, developing life is the duty and spiritual obligation of one and all. In order to fulfill this duty, the cultivation of four very important dhammas or four dhamma tools is indispensable. These four tools of Dhamma are *sati* (reflective awareness or mindfulness), *sampajaññā* (wisdom-in-action or ready comprehension), *paññā* (wisdom) and

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6. Ibid.

*samādhi* (concentration). Having these four tools in possession paves the way for development of life at every time and situation.

Time and again Buddhādāsa emphasizes that the heart of the Buddha's teaching is "*sabbe dhammā nalam abhinivesaya*" that is the realization that nothing whatsoever should be grasped at and clung to as "me" or "mine". This realization that gives rise to what he calls in Thai *cit waang* (mind free of self-idea) brings an end to all suffering at the individual as well as collective level. In other words, the whole essence of the Buddha's teaching he sums up as freedom from suffering through non-attachment, which is the antidote for reducing and nullifying absolutely the defilements of greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*). Non-grasping and non-clinging, the absence of any idea of self or of anything belonging to an abiding entity/self, which Buddhādāsa associates with the concept of *suññatā*, is according to him the most important teaching and is the core and essence of Buddhism. The Path and Fruit of Nibbāna consist in knowing this emptiness and in successively gaining the fruits of emptiness right up to the very culmination. And this can be attained through the persistent practice of seeing a thing as it-is-in-itself without projecting subjective feelings on it and this 'true seeing' can be mastered through moment-to-moment mindfulness and insightful realization of *tilakkhaṇa*, both at the conceptual and experiential level. He says, "When seeing, just to see; when hearing, just to hear. Achieving this, we become stable people. We have stability, unshakeability, and equilibrium. Although objects of every kind make contact with us in every way and by every sensory route, self does not arise."<sup>7</sup> Just like Ajahn Chah, Buddhādāsa too has laid great emphasis on the practice of *Vipassanā* meditation for cultivating and training the mind so that the above mentioned four dhamma tools are enriched enough to develop our lives. What Buddhādāsa aimed through his personal example, supervised retreats, numerous dhamma talks and colossal reflective writings was the cultivation of an interest in his followers, Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike, in the mental development of these four necessary dhammas.

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7. Buddhādāsa, Buddha-Dhamma for students, Roderick S. Bucknell trans. (Bangkok: Dhamma Study and Practice Group, 1988), p.9.

Related to Buddhadasa's concept of developing life is his concept of Dhammic Socialism. In Buddhadasa's understanding, Buddhism inherently has a socialist view of the world. But the form of Socialism that Buddhism espouses is one of dhammic type that supports harmonious co-existence with ecological systems and one's fellow beings and is quite contrary to the type of Socialism that emerged as a 'political' ideology reinforcing its stance on people through brutal means. While political socialism is still naïve an endeavor functioning within a 'worldly-matrix' and is least able to shun itself from the basic unwholesome roots of avarice, aversion and delusion, Dhammic Socialism, on the other hand, is securely tied up with the wholesome aspects of non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion, since it is not based upon any self-centric assumption or world view but rather on a holistic and collective viewpoint. It functions on the mindful awareness of the three salient features of existence – impermanence, suffering and non-self. According to Buddhadasa, wanting only what is *necessary* is the first level of morality (*sīladhamma*), one that is easy to practice and is part and parcel of Dhammic Socialism. Curbing in the desire to possess in excess, any adherent of Dhammic Socialism spontaneously cultivates the principles of loving-kindness and compassion that are foundational bases for a non-hatred attitudinal disposition.

Buddhadasa's concept of Dhammic Socialism is immensely empowering since it is not subsumed and lost under concerns of power, means, and ends. It is a form of Natural Socialism that is practical, objective, and non-delusionary in nature with its emphasis on the interdependence of existence, non-attachment to the concept of an individual self and sharing of one's material wealth as against excessive hoarding of it for personal consumption. Since everything in nature and in human society exists interdependently, the question of an independent self (*atta*) is misleading and unmindful aggrandizement of its material needs are detrimental for oneself and the society as a whole, as is evident in the capitalistic mode of growth and consumerist life style drastically affecting the inner mindscape (excess greed for material possession) and

natural environment (unpredictable climatic and ecological changes<sup>8</sup>). Contrary to the consumerist trend, Dhammic Socialism upholds the principles of minimal consumption, sustained moderation, and sharing of surplus to help reduce clinging to material wealth and possession; and views material welfare from a collective standpoint rather than a narrow individual perspective. Consequently, the principle of non-greed for possession gives rise to non-encroaching and non-harming of one's immediate surrounding (both human and ecological) for selfish ends and points towards the practicability of harmonious co-existence with one's fellow beings and nature.

According to Donald Swearer, a long-time expert on Buddhadasa, there are three fundamental principles underlying the concept of Dhammic Socialism. The first is the principle of public benefit that encompasses politics. The second is the principle of restraint and compassion, which encompasses personal conduct. The third is the principle of ecumenical respect and goodwill, which defines the correct attitudinal disposition toward all forms of life. The ideals of Dhammic Socialism have existed in the form of monastic administration since the Buddha's time, and also within the system of Buddhist doctrine and practice up until the present day. It can be ascertained that Dhammic Socialism, which is based on genuine altruism and an understanding of the principle of interdependence, ensures the promotion of an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable future for the present and future generations. In its march for global peace and harmony the UN can put the principles of Dhammic Socialism into practice along with its commitment to sustainable development, since both are not antagonistic but rather complementary, overlapping and inter-penetrating. This engagement can prove to be an enormously powerful social force that can help bridge the gap between not only developed and developing nations but also the privileged and underprivileged within any nation. The UN, instead of blindly going about applying thousands of fixes to symptoms

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8. The very recent Polar Vortex that affected the weather in the US and Canada to an alarming degree setting the severity of chilling coldness in twenty years to a record of -50 degrees Celsius has resulted from Global Warming.

of socio-economic and environmental problems, can well address the basic problem of the present-day lack of ethical consciousness and sharing through the application of the concept of Dhammic Socialism to forge the middle way to sustainable development amidst social changes.

### **MASTER SHENG YEN'S RE-INTERPRETATION OF ZEN**

In an attempt to contextualize Zen or Chan Buddhism in both its essence and practice, Master Sheng Yen (1930-2009), who belonged to both the Linji and Caodong lineages, gives a new and fresh perspective on the self, the mind, and the nature of human relationships and interactions in the world. As a longstanding meditation master with equal expertise on canonical sources, Master Sheng Yen proceeds to describe Chan from three perspectives: a way of life, a way of dealing with situations, and an orientation toward the external world. Once a practitioner has developed an understanding of Chan or perhaps has had a true experience of Chan, wisdom manifests in whatever he or she does. The awareness of a new attitude that is broad, open and non-discriminating arises spontaneously. Time and again, Master Sheng Yen emphasized that Chan relies on the two pillars of concepts and methods, and unless both are intact and working together simultaneously, one's practice will lack a firm foundation. Practice requires three kinds of 'putting aside'. First putting aside the self; second, putting aside thoughts about goals; and third, putting aside past and future.<sup>9</sup>

Master Sheng Yen divides the method of practice into four stages. The first stage has to do with suffering. One recognizes that one's problems and the difficulties that befall stem from previous volitional actions. Everything that presently exists has its origin in some other place and some other time. In the second stage, one develops the awareness that what one finds good or pleasant is also the result of causes in the past, and does not get caught up in the feelings of gladness for instance; good fortune is not taken as a sign of one's own specialness or greatness. In other words, one does not let such things add to a sense of self. By

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9. Master Sheng Yen (Taiwan: Dharma Drum Buddhist College, 2010), p. 23.

the third stage, the practitioner has come to maintain an attitude of not seeking. At the fourth level of practice one simply does whatever should be done.

According to Master Sheng Yen there are two kinds of poverty in the world – material poverty and spiritual poverty. While material poverty renders subsistence at the mundane level difficult, spiritual poverty is more dangerous since it can destroy human life and natural environment in a grand scale through the unmindful leash of greed, hatred and delusion. The paradox of today's world of technological advancement is that while material poverty still exists, spiritual poverty is escalating at an alarming scale posing a threat to the entire human race. Excessive industrialization and waste that have resulted in large-scale depletion of natural resources and destruction of environment are signs of spiritual poverty. Master Sheng Yen, therefore, urges that effective environmental protection is a mission of great urgency. However, he cautions that environmental protection must begin with a change in people's values.<sup>10</sup>

Protect the branches to save the roots;  
though a small matter it is not trivial  
Close the seven orifices,  
shut off the six senses.<sup>11</sup>

Here the branches are the minor vexations while the roots are the major ones that may last a lifetime. If one is not careful with the minor vexations they may develop into major ones. Similar to Ajahn Chah and Buddhadasa's teachings on maintaining awareness in the Six Roots, Master Sheng Yen draws attention to closing the seven orifices, two eyes, two ears, two nostrils and the mouth, and shutting off the

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10. To transform the selfish heart that plunders and seizes into a compassionate heart that gives and contributes positively, Master Sheng Yen developed the Protect the Spiritual Environment Initiative.

11. Sayings of Wang Ming as quoted by Master Sheng Yen in his dharma talk Guarding the One available on <http://www.westernchanfellowship.org/dharmataks-shengyen.html>. Similar to this is Ajahn Chah's teachings on the Noble Eightfold Path. According to Ajahn Chah the Eightfold Path of the Buddha is nothing other than the body: two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, one tongue and one body. This is the path. And the mind is the one who follows the path. Therefore both the study and the practice exist in our body, speech and mind.

six senses, seeing, hearing, smelling, taste, touch and cognition as a disciplinary way of withdrawal from the attachments to worldly things. Such discipline is indispensable to perceive how the mind of illusion functions and provides a space in which clarity develops.

Chan practice is a pursuit of personal wisdom – internally, it manifests as freedom from anxiety and vexation, a state of mental coolness; externally, it manifests in the way one interacts with the immediate environmental reality. True wisdom that arises from Chan practice is one of non-discrimination, and is always in harmony and close union with the surrounding. It is in this external manifestation one comprehends that the practice is not simply the pursuit of personal spiritual gratification. Master Sheng Yen asserts that if one is only interested in one's own freedom from vexation and one's own benefit, then one is not practicing Chan at all. This is because practicing solely for oneself is only half way progress; one may achieve a high level of concentration, yet nowhere close to genuine Chan which is always turned simultaneously outward and inward. In other words, Chan begins and ends at the logical point of changing oneself. Once the mental state has calmed and changed, the natural tendency to help others should blossom in one's heart spontaneously and perennially. This is the arising of the bodhi-mind which not only benefits oneself but also effects positive changes in the world around.

## **VIRTUE AND VIPASSANĀ MEDITATION ARE FOUNDATIONAL BASES OF BUDDHIST SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

A virtuous outlook on life and all one's undertaking is the rudimentary base of bringing in sustainable development at the personal as well as collective level. In the absence of Vipassanā, it is not easy to understand the habitual working of the mind that naturally tends to grasp at everything, and it is even more difficult to accomplish the state of non-attachment and lack of ego which are conducive to any commitment to sustainable development. Likewise, the significance of ethical codes as supportive tools for the true realization of sustainability cannot be denied. Non-adherence to ethical codes leads to personal loss as well as disruption

of social peace and harmonious co-existence. Ajahn Chah's inspirational message to his monastic disciples can be well applied to a lay Buddhist ethical standpoint as well – "Virtue and morality are the mother and father of the Dhamma growing within us, providing it with the proper nourishment and direction. Virtue is the basis for a harmonious world in which people can live truly as humans, not animals. Developing virtue is at the heart of our practice. It is very simple. Keep the training precepts. Do not kill, steal, lie, commit sexual misdeeds, or take intoxicants that make you heedless. Cultivate compassion and a reverence for all life. Take care with your goods, your possessions, your actions, your speech. Use virtue to make your life simple and pure. With virtue as a basis for everything you do, your mind will become kind, clear, and quiet. Meditation will grow easily in this soil."<sup>12</sup>

Buddhist sustainable discourse does not emphasize on convincing and persuasive speech and an ideological standpoint, but first and foremost in freeing oneself from the winding shackles of ignorance (*avijjā*) and defilements (*kilesa*). If this subjective and very personal element in Buddhist sustainable discourse gets severed, then the concept of sustainability ceases to hold any true meaning. The foundation of Buddhist sustainability is tied to mastering oneself first and then others; leading oneself first, one leads others and not the vice versa. And so no matter who we are, where we are, how well-known or least known we are, the onus of understanding and putting into practice Buddhist sustainable development rests on each of us at the individual level as well as to establishing this role in a wider context, especially in this era of global crises that have repercussions on social, economical, and environmental spheres. And the pinnacle of this entire process is the realization of the state of egolessness with the constant aid of self-reflection alongside the practice of the three-fold training laid down in the Noble Eightfold Path, within the matrix of which the practice of Vipassanā meditation is so clearly embedded.

Vipassanā meditation is the main tool of a Buddhist in the absence of which Buddhism as a way of life, practice, and thinking is hard to achieve.

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12. From the Dhamma Talk "Virtue" pp.54-55.

The Buddha bequeathed this tool to his followers so that each individual had the means to testify for himself or herself the truths he had taught. The Buddha did not base his teachings on hypothetical assumptions but rather on a pragmatic, goal-oriented and experiential understanding. A philosopher's claim that: "I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another, without sacrificing the other other, the other others"<sup>13</sup> arises from mere intellectual assumption rather than experiential realization. That is why, to any practitioner of ego-oriented mode of thoughts and hypothetical assumptions it seems that the Buddhist ethical stipulation to have attachment to nobody and equal compassion for everybody is an unattainable ideal. A philosopher's skepticism regarding the conjugality of non-attachment and universal love and compassion in Buddhism arises because he looks at the matter from a purely theoretical perspective without the use of the practical method of Vipassanā. He thus misses the point and fails to realize the simple truth that because there is non-clinging to the dictates of the ego, the state of non-attachment arises and when there is non-attachment, universal love can arise spontaneously.

Now how this process works is to be realized and practiced by oneself through the cultivation of moment to moment mindfulness in order to fight with one's defilements and the ego's endless craving that gives rise to all the three evils – greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*). And mindfulness is sustained through Vipassanā meditation that gives rise to experiential understanding of the three characteristics of existence – impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*) and non-self (*anattā*). This understanding is indispensable to free oneself from all defilements that arise from craving and attachment and when the mind is clean of selfish desire and clinging, the four divine qualities – loving-kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karunā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*) spontaneously blossom in the heart. The Buddha never gave up Vipassanā meditation even after his Enlightenment. He was never fully satiated with the practice of Vipassanā even when

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13. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, David Wills trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

under his tutelage many of his disciples (both male and female) became *arahants* and began to propagate the dhamma far and wide. So, Buddhist discourse on sustainable development implies taking this core method as a sustained practice in life for the well being of oneself as well as others since through it mindfulness can be maintained in every action in day to day life and least harm is caused to oneself, others and to the natural environment.

### **HOLISTIC WELL-BEING AND THE BUDDHIST DISCOURSE ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

The kind of training emphasized by all the three masters upholds a paradigm of holistic well-being which benefits the mind at the spiritual, psycho-cognitive, and philosophical or contemplative level. At the ethico-spiritual level, the approach trains the mind to free itself from defilements and all sorts of evil thoughts and unwholesome mental formations through the routine practice of cultivation of mindfulness focusing on the practice of Vipassanā or insight meditation and ethical reflection. The rigorous training insists on recognizing the arising of defilements and discarding them through the practice of mindfulness. As Ajahn Chah says, “The only way to reach an end in the practice of virtue is by making the mind pure.”<sup>14</sup>

With the constant mindful effort at recognizing defilements and then eradicating them, morality comes to be established on a firm attitudinal disposition that is marked by clarity of vision and understanding of the law of cause and effect i.e. resultant good or bad effects consequent on good or bad deeds. With unshakeable moral foundation the mind naturally matures to that level when it does not harbor negative emotions like feelings of jealousy, covetousness, competitiveness, vindictiveness, and revenge and so becomes calm, peaceful and non-confrontational. The non-confrontational disposition emerges because in its attempt to eradicate defilements, the mind has already learnt to recognize and wage the internal war to vanquish all unwholesome states of mind every time they arise.

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14. From the Dhamma Talk “Rules Are Tools”, p.114.

At the psycho-cognitive level, the mind is enriched by the flow of positive emotions. The spiritual or moral maturity benefits the mind immensely at the psychological level as when in the absence of defilements the mind is enriched by various positive emotions such as contentment, selfless love, fellow feeling, humility, and self-reflexivity. The inner healthy state of mind is outwardly manifested in various positive behavioral patterns like happiness, gentleness in speech and bodily actions, non-aggressiveness, moral uprightness, concern for others, ecological consciousness, love for nature and things natural, etc. With the influx of positive emotional states and mindful sustenance of them, the mind remains calm, peaceful and non-agitated and eventually, non-reactive to negative and adverse forces and unfavorable situations. When the mind is continually calm and peaceful it is innocuous and hence receptive to positive flow of mental energy that ultimately leads to infusion of inspirational joy in oneself and others alike.

At the contemplative level, the holistic training enables the mind to arrive at the state of equanimity (*upekkhā*). The mind free from defilements and desires and established on virtues gradually acquires the state of equanimity as it proceeds to see clearly all sense impressions having a common nature – impermanent, unsatisfactory, and empty of self. When equanimity is maintained, the mind gradually recognizes the pernicious workings of the ego and can distance itself from it. With growing mental strength imbibed from the practice of insight meditation and reflective apprehension of the fleeting nature of all things and the truth of *anattā* or non-substantiality i.e. all phenomena are non-self, and that there is no real essence, soul, or self, the ego can be transcended for good. A balanced mind is one that is free from clinging to the ego. When the mind matures with the transcendence of the ego, the mental state moves to the state of egolessness and once this state is achieved the mind ceases to work within the dictates of binary oppositions. This is possible because the mind is trained to see through the process of thought construction and creation of illusions that arise from continuous clinging to various physical objects and mental formations, both wholesome and unwholesome. The mind that is habitually meditative and mindfully aware realizes that good or evil only arise in one's mind and so to be

fully liberated one needs to step out of any such binaries. Transcending the binary oppositions, the mind develops non-attachment to the ego, stimuli-driven pleasures or displeasures and all mental formations – spiritual, emotional, intellectual, aesthetic, etc. The mind at this stage is tranquil and liberated with pure awareness and calmed of both elation and sorrow. This is when one realizes the Middle Path in one's practice and sustainable development both at the inner mindscape as well as the outer communal or collective level can be achieved amidst all changes.

A mind not enslaved by clinging is free from selfish desires and motives and as it realizes the true state of things as being subjected to constant change, suffering and selflessness, it gets infused with certain sublime states of mind such as loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity - qualities that are indispensable for sustainable development anywhere and at any time. The mind's realization of the true nature of everything, including the human self in all its conditioned physical and mental states, as subject to repeated alterations and non-substantiality or selflessness, empties itself of egoistic self-fulfilling desires and selfish motives, and such an empty mind is the *tabula rasa* into which imprints of the sublime states of mind can get easily encoded without any exertion.

### **BENEFITS THE WORLD CAN REAP FROM BUDDHIST DISCOURSE ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

The Buddhist discourse on sustainable development rests on the fundamental understanding of non-substantiality and non-clinging. This reflective thinking and practice so poignantly expressed in the teachings of Ajahn Chah, Buddhadasa, and Master Sheng Yen can serve as a panacea for the world steeped in the quagmire of growing discontentment. The three noble masters have clearly demonstrated that when the mind does not grasp and is not caught up in the endless circles of desires and attachment, it leads to clarity of vision. The clear vision that can arise from non-attachment is badly lacking in our lives today. The different types of clinging that Buddhism identifies, such as clinging to passions of the body, taste, smell, sound, sight, and other

types of contact (*kāmuṇāpādāna*); clinging to views, such as opinions, doctrines and various theories (*ditthupādāna*); clinging to mere rules and rituals as the only true way (*sīlabbatupādāna*); and clinging to a self and mistakenly creating a self to cling to (*attavādupādāna*), have proliferated at a rapid scale, making people's lives centered upon extremely hedonistic and myopic concerns. As a result, no matter how high and sophisticated living standards have come to be, life still remains dull at the conceptual and spiritual level.

Not only the message of non-clinging but the lesson of deconstruction of the self/ego is useful to end linguistic bickering, racial prejudices and religious disputes that have bred uncanny hatred, jealousy, vain pride, suspicion, contempt, subjugation and misuse of power among different groups of people. To sustain the reality of hybridity and multiculturalism that are characteristic traits of today's world of globalization, the deconstruction of the individual ego is indispensable. The experiences of colonialism and the two world wars have shown that vain pride in one's racial and cultural origins gives rise to hatred and contemptuous disregard for other cultures and people outside one's own community, leading to untold miseries and pain and disruption of unity and harmonious co-existence. When the principle of deconstruction of the ego is put into real practice, it helps to replace parochialism and jingoistic tendencies with loving-kindness and compassion towards others, and fosters a more receptive world view which is based on tolerance, impartiality, fairness, and egalitarianism. With a kind and compassionate mental disposition one can learn to accept and celebrate differences among groups of people from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds. While teaching his ordained disciples from various different countries and religious backgrounds Ajahn Chah emphasized, "For harmony with the group, we must give up pride and self-importance and attachment to fleeting pleasure. If you do not give up your likes and dislikes, you are not really making an effort."<sup>15</sup>

The type of mindfulness and deep understanding of non-substantiality that the three masters have urged us to develop is required for our fight with ourselves, to distill our hearts from 'bad faith' and sterilize our

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15. From the Dhamma Talk "Harmony with Others", p.119.

minds from unwholesome desires so that we are not slavishly caught up in the nexus of me and mine, I and the other. Both through the cultivation of mindfulness and reflective internalization of non-substantiality, or *anattā*, a holistic worldview can be developed. At the mundane level, the emphasis on non-substantiality is indispensable to reduce aversion and deconstruct all conflictual categories and at the supra mundane level, reflective understanding of *anattā/sunyatta* in day to day life leads to blissful contemplation and makes life worth-living. As Ajahn Chah says, “Our lives are like the breath, like the growing and falling leaves. When we can really understand about falling leaves, we can sweep the paths every day and have great happiness in our lives on this changing earth.”<sup>16</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Since Buddhist sustainable development is based on moral values and developing mindfulness and insight, it is neither nourished nor sustained by self-centered views and material interests. Going against the dictates of the ‘I’ and all its self-centered propositions, upholders of Buddhist sustainable development deconstructs all the binaries that arise from clinging to the self at the linguistic, ontological and conceptual/meditative levels.<sup>17</sup> In other words, Buddhist sustainable development helps to strike a balance between living and working selflessly for the benefit of oneself and others without at the same time upholding the ego and its endless claims for self-aggrandizement. Looking at the inspiring life and teachings of Ajahn Chah, Buddhadasa, and Master Sheng Yen, we see the ideals of Buddhist sustainable development – truthfulness, moral uprightness, virtuousness, mindfulness, self-integrity, non-discrimination, ecumenical sharing, and environmental concern manifesting brilliantly. Their moral standpoint enabled them to work selflessly for the benefit of all who sought their spiritual

16. From the Dhamma Talk “The Leaves Will Always Fall”, p.104.

17. Dipti Mahanta, “Buddhist deconstruction in practice: A reflection on Luangpho Chah’s dismantling of the binary”, *Journal of International Buddhist Studies* Vol.3 (Bangkok: Buddhist Research Institute, 2011), pp.1-19.

guidance without the least expectation of any material gain in return. The inspiration that they derived from Vipassanā meditation practice that led to a deep reflective understanding and internalization of the three inherently omnipresent characteristics of all conditioned states and existences – impermanence, suffering, and non-substantiality – perpetually guided them to act in a righteous manner devoid of any self-interest. They have glorified the truth that in the absence of virtue, morality, and realization of the state of egolessness, Buddhist sustainable development can neither be actualized at the individual nor at the collective level. Conserving the inner ecology along the path of morality, concentration and wisdom laid down in the Noble Eightfold Path is a message distinct in all three masters. Ajahn Chah’s very pertinent and timely advice – “Don’t discriminate... You must learn the value of giving and devotion. Be patient. Practice morality. Live simply and be natural. Watch the mind. This is our practice. It will lead you to unselfishness. To peace”<sup>18</sup> – if put into practice with genuine effort, would definitely lead to the middle way of sustainable development amidst social changes.

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