

Buddhist Response to Sustainable Development and Social Change

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“We need to think of the future and the planet we are going to leave to our children and their children.”¹

Kofi Annan (Former² Secretary – General of United Nations)

With special reference to the Buddhist “commentaries”, the requirement of a social change becomes a major issue not only in the current society, but also it was a communal necessity in the antecedent Buddhist community. That may be the main motive that the Buddha continuously tried to wake up people from the narrow dreams which lead society to the destructive termination. In the same manner, the United Nations has identified the areas where this social change needs to take place in order to attain the sustainable development as envisioned.

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1. http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/k/kofi_annan.html#ue0sa2OmmoRgtQ3h.99

2. From 1st of January 1997 to 31st of December 2006

Today we are one community lives as a family under the roof of a prodigious home “United Nations”. With our own optimistic interpretations and different kinds of traditional diversities, we are trying to build a world with sustainable development and essential social changes. Therefore, in this paper I would like to evince four main areas which need to advert to fulfil millennium development goals of the United Nations (MDGs), with the combination of Buddhist response for each.

1. Gender equality
2. Global partnership for development
3. Developing primary education
4. Improving ethical values among all religious communities

GENDER EQUALITY

The Buddhism arose when the Brahmanic concepts were deeply rooted in the Indian society. Patriarchal theory was the capital idealism which led the society at that time. But with a pellucid vision, the major Buddhist ideas always give priority to the women as equivalent as the men. The concept of four virtues such as giving, endearing speech, well behaviour and equality (dānaṃ, peyyavajjaṃ, atthacariyā, and samānattatā)³ is well practiced among Buddhists and became the basis of humanity.

At the present time, with a clear vision of current world affairs, the United Nations pay their pivotal advertence to the women through their third goal.⁴ There are four sub topics which lead global attention to empower women such as, Gender Parity in Education, Gender Parity in Non-Agricultural Employment, Gender Parity in Political Representation and Sexual and reproductive health and rights.⁵ Equally the Buddha directly engaged to protect the women’s rights in the early brāhmanic society with his great teachings. The Dhītu Sutta⁶ noticeably admonishes to the men by saying that, there are no any being who was not being their daughter in the past, in this long train of existences and all beings in

3. Aṅguttara Nikāya IV, Sangaha Sutta, p. 32 PTS

4. Promote gender equality and empower women

5. Thematic Paper on MDG 3, Promote gender equality and empower women

6. Saṃyutta Nikāya Vol. 02, Nidāna Vagga, P 244 PTS

this world are relatives. Additionally, it again focused on gender equality by saying men should not pride about their manhood and condemning women is equal to condemning their own past women life. Women should not worry about their womanhood since it is common to all beings in this world. This is an extraordinary explanation to the upcoming religious questions about gender equality in Buddhism because women's role in Buddhism is completely in an optimistic area, not only in the early period but it is also relevant to modern world too.

To illustrate, the *Āvenika Dukkha Sutta*⁷ discusses about the distressful circumstances woman faced in her lifetime which man does not experience.

1. When a woman gets married, she has to go away from her family members, her house and neighbors.
2. Woman has a period once a month, which man never has to experience.
3. Woman conceives and tolerates all inconveniences during that time.
4. Woman delivers babies and feeds them from her breast with love and compassion.

The society should have a clear idea about these incidents because it emphasizes the dedication which women do without displaying. Therefore she needs protection from her husband and family as same she should be protected by the society. Especially husband should care about her and pay attention to her during the times she is uncomfortable with natural incidents in her life. Women's feelings can change during the time when she suffers from physical problems. So the husband should be able to understand her and help her to get rid of her suffering with a compassionate mind. This situation can be compared with the United Nations vision of sexual and reproductive health and rights of the women. It is really needed to emphasize that "woman is not an option to have only sex". She also is a being who has identical feelings and physical organs as well as man with slight alterations". With this statement sexual harassments can be detached gradually with the factual indulgent about the women and it helps to make a social change with a gender equality.

⁷.Samyutta Nikāya iv, p. 259 PTS

In addition, a woman's ability to have a proper education can be used as a third eye to change wrong interpretations which emphasize woman as a slight intelligent being. The Buddha's interpretation of woman's wisdom is highly appreciated in the Vaddha Sutta.

Saddhāya sīlena ca yādha vaḍḍhati
Paññāya cāgena sutena cūbhayaṃ
Sā tādisī sīlavaṭī upāsikā
Ādiyati sāraṃ idheva attanoti.[^]

“She grows in conviction & virtue, discernment, generosity, & learning. A virtuous female lay disciple such as this takes hold of the essence, right here within herself.”⁹

Educated woman can subscribe to “eradicate extreme poverty and hunger”¹⁰ through the concepts she learned as well as experienced in the competitive world. In the family life she leads the family alike man, to create a successful future generation. In my point of view, poverty is a by-product of lack of education and hunger is a by-product of poverty. Therefore, as a first step she can contribute her wisdom to generate a perfect child in the world with her guidance. Without narrow suggestions to dispel her in unnecessary ways, the society needs to make a new discussion with the accomplishing influence of the United Nations vast vision of a proper social change. To achieve it, Buddhist doctrine can be used as a volunteer.

GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP FOR DEVELOPMENT

With special reference to the seven targets on Global partnership for development, it focused on development aid, trade, debt relief, affordable essential drugs and foreign direct investment¹¹ with other countries.

8. Samyutta Nikāya IV, Saḷāyatana saṃyutta, Vaddha Sutta, P. 250 PTS

9. “Vaddha Sutta: Growth” (SN 37.4), translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. Access to Insight (Legacy Edition), 1 July 2010, <http://www.accesstinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn37/sn37.034.than.html> .

10. 1st Millennium Development Goal

11. Millennium Development Goal 8: Developing a Global Partnership for Development Progress Report by the Netherlands, page 09, <http://www.undg.orgReport.pdf>

This leads us to a sustainable world because it clearly aids, to reduce the economic cavity between developed countries and other countries. As the Buddhist commentaries mentioned, in ancient time also the Buddhist teachings demonstrated the value of peace to a sustainable development. The Metta Sutta is the best example which can lead society to a peaceful end. It can be called as a hymn of a universal love.

“Mettañ ca sabbalokasmiṃ
mānasam bhāvaye aparimāṇaṃ
uddhaṃ adho ca tiriyañ ca
asambādhaṃ averaṃ asaṇṇaṃ”¹²

Develop an unlimited heart of friendliness in the entire universe, sending compassion above, below, and all around, beyond all narrowness, beyond all rivalry, beyond all hatred.¹³

Initially, there should be a universal concordat to all nations to counsel their own people with the special guidance of a world approved a committee to establish peace in the nation. My central target of this idea is we should solve conflicts in our home before we advise others to have peace in their home. This is not a difficult step to develop a global partnership because if the root is accomplished, with an intense attention to the goal, we can make sustainable world with the peace.

Trading and direct foreign investment might be optimistic opportunity for developing countries to make a link with developing countries. As I think, the most of the developing countries could not reach to the developmental level because of feckless management of resources they already have. The global market is always directed to the upcoming productivities. With the creativity and natural resources, it is not a difficult task to join with other countries via trade. It can establish global partnership while developing the nation.

Exchanging knowledge and cultural values among nations is another

12. Khuddaka Nikāya , Sutta Nipāta, Uruga Vagga, , Karaṇīyametta Sutta, P. 26 PTS

13. Translated by Ratnaprabha, karaṇīya metta sutta, Buddha’s words on loving kindness, <https://thebuddhistcentre.com, KaraniyaMetta Sutta.pdf>

way to have a social change with a new silhouette. By this point people gradually direct their mind to respect various cultural patterns while having a notion about it. At the beginning of the Buddhist era, there were a number of clans in the Indian society. The caste system was highly rated and the Brāhmins were the highest caste at that time. How extreme was that, even low-caste people could not utter the Vedas¹⁴ because of their low-caste-status. In such a narrow situation Buddhism arose as a radical guider in the Indian society but in a peaceful way. Some of Buddhist Suttas such as the Vasala Sutta¹⁵ and the Parābhava Sutta¹⁶ had shown straight objection to the caste system. Rather than accepting the wrong social consent, the Buddha stepped out from the narrow judgment of abase people due to the caste. That was a successful phase of a social change and Buddhist treatment of equality might be the closed reason to spread Buddhism very quickly within and beyond India.

Finally, according to this topic my attention leads to the war circumstances that arise from time to time all over the world. Though we are humans, with wrong defilements people always bound by hatred and craving and nowadays it makes a dangerous situation with nuclear experiments. However to establish a peaceful world with a better relationship, a person must get away from hatred as well as craving.

Na hi verena verāni, sammantīdha kudācanam
Averena ca sammanti, esa dhammo sanantano¹⁷

“Hatred is never appeased by hatred in this world. By non-hatred alone is hatred appeased. This is an eternal law.”

DEVELOPING PRIMARY EDUCATION

According to United Nations second Millennium Development Goal¹⁸, it ensures that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will

14. The highest doctrine of the Brahmins, oldest scriptures in Hinduism

15. Khuddaka Nikāya, Sutta Nipāta, Uruga Vagga, P. 21 PTS

16. Khuddaka Nikāya, Sutta Nipāta, Uruga Vagga, P. 19 PTS

17. Dhammapada Yamaka vagga, verse 05

18. Achieve Universal Primary education

be able to complete a full course of primary schooling¹⁹. Accepting to the main objective I believe that education is the most appropriate way to eradicate hunger and poverty. Still in sub Saharan African countries, more than 30 per cent of primary school students drop out before reaching the final grade.²⁰ For the occurrence of such a situation, the main reason might be the uneducated background of the parents. However the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) works with African countries to develop a primary education while protecting girls from child marriages.

Early Buddhist teachings focused on the primary education level in the family. Rather than a formal education it is close to teaching ethical patterns. Parents are called as “pubbācariya” which means “first teachers” because they are the first instructors among other teachers. The best example of primary education in the early Buddhist period was focused on the ethical development through self-discipline. The Buddha’s advices to Venerable Rāhula, as his father and also as his teacher, nicely described in the Ambalaṭṭhikā Rāhulovāda Sutta as given below.

“Yadeva tvaṃ rāhula manasā kammaṃ kattukāmo ahosi tadeva te manokammaṃ paccavekkhitabbam; Sace tvaṃ rāhula paccavekkhamāno evaṃ jāneyyāsi yaṃ kho ahaṃ idaṃ manasā kammaṃ kattukāmo, idamme manokammaṃ attavyābādhāyapi saṃvatteyya, paravyābādhāyapi saṃvatteyya, ubhayavyābādhāyapi saṃvatteyya akusalaṃ idaṃ manokammaṃ dukkhudrayaṃ dukkhavipākanti”²¹

“Rāhula, if you feel to do something, you should replicate. If I do this, will it harm to me, will it harm to others or will it harm to both. Is this bodily action is a drawback? Is it disagreeable? When replicating if you know this bodily action will bring trouble to me, to others and to both, it is demerit, it is unpleasant. If possible you should not do it.”

At the primary level, formal education and inner development should

19. Fact sheet, UNITED NATIONS SUMMIT 20-22 September 2010, New York High-level Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly

20. Fact sheet, UNITED NATIONS SUMMIT 20-22 September 2010, New York High-level Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly

21. Majjhima Nikāya ii, Ambalaṭṭhikā Rāhulovāda Sutta, P. 418 PTS

improve in a parallel order. If not finally it creates a person with a vast knowledge about the material effects, but he/she might slip moral development while collecting erudition. According to Nevin Fennaman, “the purpose of primary education is the development of your deep characteristics, the purpose of university education is the development of your strengths.” Therefore the primary education is not only for collecting knowledge, but, also to be a genuine person.

IMPROVING ETHICAL VALUES AMONG ALL RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

His Holiness the Dalai Lama highlighted that, “every person on this earth has the freedom to practice or not practice religion. It is all right to do either²²”. We are living in a multi-religious and multi-cultural biosphere with a lot of variances. According to own understanding people have right to believe in any religion what they wish. Not only in modern time, but also in ancient time there were also a number of philosophies when Buddhism had arisen. But as a leader the Buddha never abased other philosophies. He had a good relationship with all other people. When some person came to meet him, he never thought about his caste, religion or his/her social status. There are some special qualities that the Buddha had when anyone comes to meet him. The Buddha had practiced several methods to build a mutual understanding and it is nicely described in the Kūṭadanta Sutta.

“Samano kho bho gotamo ehisagatavādī sakhilo sammodako
Abbhākuṭiko uttānamukho pubbhābhāsī”²³

“Monks, the Gautama Buddha warmly welcome visitors, speak sweet words which people love to hear, greatest in discussions, never flinch eyes, speak well and talks first when a visitor comes”.

Humbleness is the first requirement to make a friendly ethnic community. Then people will be able to make a peaceful global society. In

22. *Excerpts from His Holiness the Dalai Lama's address to the inter-faith seminar organised by the International Association for Religious Freedom, Ladakh Group, in Leh, <http://www.dalailama.com/messages/religious-harmony>*

23. Dīgha Nikāya i, Silakkhandha Vagga, Kūṭadanta Sutta, P. 127 PTS

the Brahmajāla Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya the Buddha advised monks that they should never get angry when others blame the Sangha, Buddhism or the Buddha.

“Mamaṃ vā bhikkhave pare avaṇṇaṃ bhāseyyuṃ
Dhammassa vā avaṇṇaṃ bhāseyyuṃ saṅghassa vā
avaṇṇaṃ bhāseyyuṃ
tattha tumhe hi na āghāto na appaccayo na cetaso
anabhiraddhi karaṇīyā”²⁴

“Monks, do not be thin-skinned when someone condemns me, condemns the Dhamma or condemns the Saṅgha”.

Through Soṇadaṇḍa Sutta,²⁵ the Buddha tried to protect the social status of the Soṇadaṇḍa, a Brāhmin who came to meet the Buddha. Because of religious harmonic behaviour, non-Buddhists also had an affable relationship with the Buddha. This is an applicable lesson to the religious extremists in contemporary society. Though we believe in Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism or any other philosophy, as developed minded human beings, we can understand that all religions show us the way to lead our life in a harmonious way. In the end, all doctrines focused on one theme of “peace”.

In the modern society, religious conflicts begin due to the cause of aberration and religious extremism. All doctrines emphasise the value of non-violence and harmony, but unfortunately with modernization the society sways to the immoral practices and now it becomes community which is dominated by currency. Nevertheless every religion directs us to the harmonic way, finally people are in a battle because of religious controversy.

The Buddha never commanded anyone to believe in Buddhism. Whenever someone seeks out for Buddhism, his answer was “Ehi Passiko”, “come and see”. That is how the Buddha admired liberalism not only with words, but also with action. For example, after the rainy season

24.Dīgha Nikāya i ,Brahmajāla Sutta, , P. 03 PTS

25.Dīgha Nikāya, Sutta No 4, P. 111 PTS

the Buddha's advice for the first sixty monks was,

“Caratha Bhikkhave cārikaṃ bahujaṇa hitāya bahujaṇa sukhāya²⁶”

“Monks, go for a walk for the benefit of the people and for the happiness of the people”.

In addition, Special requirement of good health is inevitable fact which directly effects to the sustainable development. Before develop the world, human should take care of their physical condition due to the upcoming social diseases such as HIV/ AIDS and Malaria. Therefore, it is better to join for combat HIV/ AIDS, Malaria and other diseases²⁷ with the United Nations to protect ourselves as well as the society. In my point of view, these types of social conflicts arise due to the lack of sex education and lack of health education in the secondary level education.

To illustrate, with appropriate antenatal education, it becomes easier to improve maternal health ²⁸and reduce child mortality²⁹. Prominently there should be a special consideration on children who assume future of the world. If their existence is in a dangerous position, the future of the world also in a trouble. Hence, before the conflicts increase, it is much better to find a solution to protect them.

With the influence of the Buddhist teachings, my suggestion is that there is no any correct usage of doctrine if society cannot apply it in a practical manner. With crystal vision,

- If Buddhists accept Dhamma (doctrine) and Vinaya (discipline) as their teacher after the Buddha,
- If Muslims accept teachings of holy Quran which says “**walk not on the earth with conceit and arrogance**” [al-Isra’ 17:37],
- If Catholics accept the teachings of the Holy Bible, which says “Now may the Lord of peace Himself continually grant you peace in

26. Dīgha Nikāya II, Mahāvagga, Mahāpadāna Sutta, p. 0046 PTS

27. 6th Millennium Development Goal

28. 5th Millennium Development Goal

29. 4th Millennium Development Goal

every circumstance, The Lord be with you all!”³⁰ (Thessalonians 3:16),

➤ If Hindus accept the teachings of the Bhagavadgītā which says, “*The disunited mind is far from wise, how can it meditate? How be at peace? When you know no peace, how can you know joy?*”³¹ (*The Bhagavadgīta*, 2:55-72),

There should not be religious terrorism anymore in this world. We have an opportunity to start a comparative study among each and every religion through all religious guidance. Comparative study could avoid objectionable discussions and finally help establish a human amity to make a world without diversity among people.

To conclude, though sometimes current world affairs faced deleterious incidences while walking for a sustainable development. With suitable solutions, the United Nations plays an extraordinary role to get rid of the main social problems by Millennium Development Goals. It is essential to apply Buddhist responses to make United Nations attempt to have a successful outcome. Buddhist theories are easier to handle with wisdom than using it without considering the core concepts. Therefore, in this scientific world, to have a better social change with sustainable development, our brain should be cleansed with the value of right action and right vision. Then we can organize final destination through science and religion for a better future. That may be the reason Immanuel Kant³²expressed,

“Science is organized knowledge, Wisdom is organized life.”

30. Holy Bible, <http://voices.yahoo.com/10-encouraging-bible-verses-peace-5762222.html?cat=34>

31. Bhagavad Gita, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2013/06/living-the-bhagavad-gita/>

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