

Buddhist Approach to Sustainability and Achieving Millennium Development Goals

Gábor Kovács (*)

PREFACE

This paper presents the Buddhist approach to the conceptions of sustainability and development. It deals with the interpretation of the United Nation's (UN) Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) from a Buddhist perspective. It examines the conception of sustainable development, the background of the MDGs. Furthermore, it draws up the Buddhist solution for securing environmental sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

Based on the its commitment towards human rights and sustainable development, the United Nations adopted the Millennium Declaration (MD) in 2000 at its Millennium Summit. In accordance with the global solution of the world's social problems, the MD asserted the commitment that everyone has the right to basic human values of dignity, freedom and equality, to the basic standards of living and to development (United

(*) Corvinus University of Budapest

Nations 2000). Right after proclaiming this framework of development, Millennium Development Goals were established by unanimous agreement of all the member states of the UN. The MDGs set eight concrete goals with specific targets and indicators in order to achieve the objectives of the Millennium Declaration until 2015 (Eight Goals for 2015). The MD was the theoretical framework of the UN's commitment and the MDGs were the concrete measurements of the progress in practice.

The eight Millennium Development Goals are (1) the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, (2) the achievement of universal primary education, (3) the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women, (4) the reduction of child mortality, (5) the improvement of maternal health, (6) combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, (7) securing environmental sustainability and (8) the development of a global partnership (Eight Goals for 2015, Millennium Development Goals; We Can End Poverty).

The *Dhamma* or the teaching of the Buddha is fundamentally about the eradication of suffering: how individual beings can reach liberation by removing the roots of suffering. One necessary condition of this process is the satisfaction of basic human needs. Furthermore, the Dhamma contains direct social teachings how to meet these needs, but there are numerous Buddhists, who deal with social issues, approaching them from the more profound ethical point (Harvey 2000, Wee, 2001, Gnanarama 2005). Hence besides the United Nations' attention to the most stressing problems of the modern world, Buddhist monks and scholars are also paying significant attention to the same subjects.

Thus one starting point of the discussion is that the UN is aware of the prevailing social difficulties and is striving to solve them by employing the MDGs. The other starting point is the Dhamma, which is dealing with liberation, but recognizes the necessity of basic needs for liberation. Both of the approaches are in some way dealing with all the subjects highlighted in the MDGs. Hereinafter the paper examines how Buddhism interprets these eight fields of development and the spirit of the MDGs. It is looking for the answer of how these two approaches can be attuned and what are their common interfaces. Lastly it is investigating how

Buddhism can contribute to the realization of Millennium Development Goals, especially providing environmental sustainability. But before investigating these issues the paper primarily explores the historical background of the MDGs.

THE BRIEF HISTORY OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, THE BACKGROUND OF MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

The importance of sustainable development had been recognized gradually in the 20th century, substituting the prevailing myth of unlimited material and economic growth. In 1972 the Club of Rome published *The Limits to Growth* report, in which the expected consequences of limitless growth in an earth-like, limited environment was articulated. It was concluded that political, economic and social changes were necessary for the future (Meadows et. al. 1972). Then the World Conservation Strategy was released in 1980. In its section “Towards Sustainable Development”, a new international development strategy was articulated to address inequities and habitat destructions (World Conservation Strategy 1980). These achievements contributed to shape the report of the *Brundtland Commission: Our Common Future* in 1987. It weaves together social, economic, cultural, and environmental issues. It was the first paper in which the concept of sustainable development was introduced and defined:

“Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concepts:

- the concept of ‘needs’, in particular the essential needs of the world’s poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and
- the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment’s ability to meet present and future needs” (Our Common Future... 1987).

From this time on, the conception and the implementation of sustainable development has been developing and refining. The most

important cornerstones in its development process were the establishment of the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) in 1990; the arrangement of United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) – better known as The Earth Summit – in 1992; the first meeting of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development in 1993; the launch of Dow Jones Sustainability Indices in 1999; the arrangement of World Summit on Sustainable Development which was held in Johannesburg, marking 10 years since the UNCED in 2002; and the formulation of Green Economy ideas at the end of the 2000's (Creech 2010).

The United Nations was taking significant part in promoting the conception of sustainable development worldwide. In 2000 The Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals were also established in the spirit of sustainable development. The MDGs were designated in order to attain the development of underdeveloped countries. The eight goals are expanding to three fundamental areas: (i) human capital, (ii) infrastructure and (iii) human rights (social, political and economic) with the intent of increasing living standards and provide development. Human capital objectives include nutrition, healthcare (child mortality, maternal health and combating diseases) and education. Infrastructure objectives include access to safe drinking water, energy and information technology. Human rights objectives include empowering women, reducing violence, increasing political voice, ensuring equal access to public services and increasing security of property rights (Millennium Development Goals..., We Can End Poverty...).

As the denomination indicates, Millennium Development Goals represent desirable ends: goals to be achieved. They are not prescriptions for the means by which those ends are to be achieved. The eight goals have 21 target values, measured by many corresponding indicators. They say nothing, for example, about the importance of effective health systems, which are essential to the achievement of all of the health goals (Haines & Cassels 2004).

MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS FROM A BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE

Millennium Development Goals are testifying that the UN is giving subtle importance to sustainable future development. Successful completion of the goals by 2015 is a global priority, creating a stable foundation for future development (United Nations 2013). The spirit of the MDGs is parallel to the Buddhist approach to material needs, which emphasizes the importance of basic necessities of life: food, clothing, shelter, and needed medical care (Payutto 1994). The areas covered by the MDGs are mostly the same as the areas, which Buddhism was given importance as necessities.

The first of the eight goals is (1) the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger. Nutrition is one of the basic necessities according to the Buddhist texts; its importance is inevitable in maintaining the physical body (Payutto 1994). Extreme poverty refers to hardship and should not be confused with simplicity or frugality, which are purposeful choices regarding Buddhist livelihood.

The second goal is (2) the achievement of universal primary education. From the age of the Buddha, the Dhamma has served as primary education, thus satisfying directly the need for basic education. It is one of the three jewels of Buddhism, which is ensuring proper methods and basic knowledge for Buddhist followers. Thus its importance is unquestionable as it occupies similar place in the life of Buddhists than all the basic necessities.

The third goal is (3) the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women. According to cultural influences, the subject of gender equality was not a vital question in the age of the Buddha. Women were mostly superseded from other than household practices. Nevertheless, Buddhism is a tradition, which acknowledged the spiritual equality of women (Dhammavihari 2000). Although the Buddha was initially reluctant to ordain women, he finally established the order of nuns (which has been living tradition since then), thus making gender equality more explicit in the tradition.

The fourth goal is (4) the reduction of child mortality. As it was

enunciated in his first sermon, death, dying, and mortality are taking a profound place in the Buddha's teachings: all of them are suffering (SN 56.11). Mortality accompanies life and the Dhamma is about how to deal with and how to eliminate all the phenomena, that is causing suffering.

From a Buddhist approach, the fifth and the sixth goals are closely related as both of them connected to health care. The fifth goal is (5) the improvement of maternal health, and the sixth goal is (6) combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases. Parallel to the case of mortality, sickness and diseases are suffering, and have to be eliminated by Buddhist practices (SN 56.11). Furthermore, health care is one of the four basic necessities, thus its crucial importance is unquestionable (Payutto 1994).

The seventh goal is (7) securing environmental sustainability. In the age of the Buddha, human activity was less influential on environmental degradation, biodiversity and on the intactness of ecosystems. Thus Buddhism originally did not deal directly with environmental sustainability in an age, when the ecological footprint of human beings was not as great as nowadays. Nevertheless, Buddhist livelihood inherently encompasses an environmental-friendly attitude towards nature by employing Buddhist environmental ethics (Harris 1994, Pragati 2008, James 2009).

The eighth goal is (8) the development of a global partnership. The spirit of partnership can be found in the Buddhist communities. Even if the monkhood or the laity is taken into consideration, the purpose of the *Saṅgha* or the community is the development of co-operation and partnership amongst people, thus aiding and supporting the needy members of the community. Although the MDGs' global partnership refers to countries and global enterprises, the spirit of its initiative is similar to the spirit and the goal of the *Saṅgha*.

THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

The UN Millennium Development Goals were announced in 2000 for fifteen years. All of the eight goals have specific target values, which should be achieved until 2015. A major conference was held in 2010 to review the progress of the MDGs. The conference concluded with the

adoption of a global action plan to accelerate the implementation, because of significant lags in the progress of achievement. Moreover, according to the reports of 2013, the progress towards the goals was uneven. Some countries achieved many goals, while others were not on track to realize any (United Nations 2013).

Although the progress of the MDGs are uneven, and varying from region to region and country to country, the United Nations announced that three of the eight goals have been met prior to the final deadline of 2015: the number of people who live in extreme poverty is halved; the number of people who do not get safe drinking water is also halved; the incidence of malaria is halted; the number of people who are infected with HIV is reduced; the number of slum dwellers are reduced; finally international trade is developed (<http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/Data.aspx>, United Nations 2013).

The assessment of the Millennium Development Goals also contains the issues to be improved. Accelerated progress is needed in many areas: child mortality, maternal health, and primary education. According to the report, there are still flashy disparities between rural and urban population; and gender-based inequalities are also significant (United Nations 2013). The most pressing area in which accelerated progress is badly needed is the seventh development goal: securing environmental sustainability. The only accomplished target of this goal pertains the sustainable access to safe drinking water. The not-yet-met targets of environmental sustainability are: (a) the integration of the principles of sustainable development into country policies; (b) the reversing loss of environmental resources; (c) the reduction of biodiversity loss; and (d) halving the population without basic sanitation. In addition there are more pressing problems concerning to environmental sustainability: increasing greenhouse gas emission, the overfishing of the waters, and deforestation (United Nations 2013, Millennium Development Goals...).

Securing environmental sustainability should be the most profound of all the Millennium Development Goals; still this needs to be improved, not just to achieve the target values of the MDGs, but to secure our own future on the planet. Hereinafter the paper deals with how Buddhism can contribute

to achieve environmental sustainability, declared in the Millennium Development Goals, but before this it is necessary to investigate how the terms sustainability and development can be interpreted by Buddhism.

THE BUDDHIST INTERPRETATION OF SUSTAINABILITY

The heart of the Buddha's teachings is the *tilakkhaṇa*, the Three Signs of Being, which describes that every phenomenon is conditioned and shares three fundamental characteristics: (i) *anicca* or impermanence, (ii) *dukkha* or unsatisfactoriness, and (iii) *anattā* or the lack of permanent self. Its most important occurrences in the Pāli Canon are collected by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli (2008). The *tilakkhaṇa* is the foundation of Buddhist theory and practice. The most important of them from the thread of this paper is the first one, *anicca*: impermanence or transience.

According to *anicca*, there is nothing in the phenomenal world, which is not subjected to ongoing change. Nothing is everlasting, unchanging, permanent or stable. Thus the issue of phenomenal existence is approached in a different way than it is approached by the modern Western culture. Permanence does not exist at all, and that is why clinging to worldly phenomena is meaningless and results suffering. Impermanence is the very core of the Buddha's teachings, and also the basis for the other two characteristics of existence (*dukkha* and *anattā*), which are not the subjects of this paper.

The concepts of sustainability refer to a process in which a certain state of being is sustained: the preservation of a particular state of existence. It is motivated by longing for constancy. From the point of impermanence, the aim of sustainability cannot be accomplished, as the Buddhist worldview does not admit permanence, which is implied in its notion. As every phenomenon is subjected to decay and cessation, sustainability cannot be achieved directly. Therefore clinging to its realization cannot be interpreted as anything other than a striving, which results in suffering.

THE BUDDHIST INTERPRETATION OF DEVELOPMENT

The foremost goal of Buddhism is the final cessation of suffering (MN 22,

MN 63, SN 12.15, SN 22.86, SN 56.11) The *cattāri ariyasaccāni* or the Four Noble Truths, deals with the cessation of suffering and declares its instrument, which is the *ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo* or the Noble Eightfold Path. This path is the Middle Way or the Threefold Practice, the instrument of purifying the human character. Its eight divisions can be grouped into three parts: (i) wisdom (which is including Right View and Right Decision); (ii) virtues (which is including Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood); and (iii) concentration (which is including Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration). Buddhist lifestyle aims to improve these three synergistic abilities to perfection by ongoing practice, which is a development process. Nevertheless in this case development is just a by-product of Buddhist practice, not a direct aim which must be attained. The development process is an inner spiritual advancement, which is emerging by ongoing practice, and leads to liberation.

The conception of development is included in the Dhamma, but with three main differences as it is interpreted in the mainstream approach: (1) the development process is an inner, spiritual progress (exclusive material development is not praised and not important above a necessary level for one's inner advancement); (2) the development process is not a direct goal in itself, but a direct consequence of the purification of the human character; (3) the development is not sustainable, rather is emerging as a by-product of ongoing practice.

As it is also articulated, ensuring necessary material background is essential for spiritual development. The four basic needs must be met before spiritual development can be achieved or even started. That is why applying appropriate social activities is crucial to ensure them, as it is emphasized in the spirit of the Millennium Development Goals.

HOW BUDDHISM CONTRIBUTES TO ACHIEVE ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

Modern economic practices are resulting a downward environmental spiral, a vicious circle in which environmental degradation is growing in ever-greater extent. The seventh Millennium Development Goal was

established by the UN to prevent these negative consequences and reverse the process to an upward direction to transform the vicious changes to a virtuous circle. Inevitably, one of the foremost goals is securing environmental sustainability, although the reports show that it has the poorest achievements amongst the eight goals. Target values are established, but means to achieve them are not designated. Buddhism cannot deal with the problem of environmental sustainability directly as it is dealt with in the MDGs, because, according to impermanence, sustainability is directly unattainable. Buddhists have to move beyond grasping to the notion of sustainability and sustainable development, and approach environmental sustainability from a deeper level.

The Dhamma is able to give adequate and even more profound solution to environmental difficulties: Buddhist livelihood is harmonizing with virtuous changes and leading to positive consequences on each planes of existence, as they are connected with morality. Environmental awareness and sustainability is inherently embedded in the Dhamma as an emerging consequence of Buddhist lifestyle. The ethical instructions of the *pañcasīla* or the Five Precepts points beyond the realization of well being in the society, as they also refer to environmental preservation and ensure the prospects of future generations. The Five Precepts are the foundation of Buddhist environmental ethics (Harris 1994, Harvey 2000, Pragati 2008, James 2009). Buddhist livelihood is inherently frugal and simple as it is striving to satisfy basic human needs, but deny all additional desires aiming consumption (Welford 2006, Zsolnai 2008). Basic necessities are similar to the ones, emphasized in the MDGs, and all of them are essential for leading a life, on which spiritual development can be grounded. After satisfying basic necessities, Buddhist lifestyle involves inner development instead of striving for material sustainability. But achieving material sustainability is a concomitant phenomenon of this kind of spiritual development. Thus frugality and simplicity relieves the environmental pressure of economics, and Buddhist livelihood contributes to reverse environmental degradation and shape a virtuous circle, an upward spiral.

CONCLUSIONS

As the official homepage of the Millennium Development Goals states, the MDGs have galvanized unprecedented efforts to meet the needs of the world's poorest (We Can End Poverty...). Some of the goals have already been achieved or will be achieved until 2015. Ensuring environmental sustainability is one of the most stressing problems of our modern world, and it is also on the agenda of the MDGs, but the performance of this area is not sufficient to achieve the designated target values until the deadline. Critics go further and say that insufficient emphasis on environmental sustainability is a major deficiency of the Millennium Development Goals (Deneulin & Shahani 2009).

The Buddhist interpretation of the MDGs reveals that Buddhism basically gives the same importance to all of the mentioned goals as they are regarded as basic necessities of life. Thus Buddhism is very close to the Millennium Development Goals, but very far from its spirit. The MDGs are designating desirable ends without denoting the means to achieve them. In contrast with this, Buddhism is a means of liberation, which is based on material necessities, but points to a further end: spiritual perfection. Buddhist livelihood, following the Noble Eightfold Path, is the means to spiritual perfection, but more importantly, it is inherently gives solution for the weakness of the MDGs – it is ensuring environmental sustainability by leading a frugal, simple, environmentally sound livelihood.

Buddhism cannot interpret sustainable development and sustainability directly as it is approached by the Millennium Development Goals. It is approaching these subjects similarly to the *Paṭicca Sammuppāda* or Dependent Origination:

“When Buddhism is practiced, environmental sustainability will be achieved. From the practicing of Buddhism comes the achievement of environmental sustainability.”

Thus Buddhism brings about positive social and environmental changes and the achievement of performance indicators like the United Nations Millennium Development Goals as a consequence of leading a Buddhist livelihood.

REFERENCES

- Creech, H. 2010, *The Sustainable Development Timeline*, 6th edition, International Institute for Sustainable Development, Winnipeg.
- Deneulin, S. & Shahani, L. 2009, *An Introduction to the Human Development and Capability Approach: Freedom and Agency*, Sterling, London, Available at: <http://idl-bnc.idrc.ca/dspace/bitstream/10625/40248/1/128806.pdf>.
- Dhammavihari, Ven. 2000, *Women and the Religious Order of the Buddha*, Available at: <http://www.buddhismtoday.com/english/sociology/021-religiousorder.htm>
- Eight Goals for 2015*, Available at: <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/mdgoverview/>.
- Haines, A. & Cassels, A. 2004, *Can the Millennium Development Goals Be Attained?*, Available at: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC509351/>.
- Harris, I. 1994, 'Causation and Telos: The Problem of Buddhist Environmental Ethics', *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, vol. 1, pp. 45-56.
- Harvey, P. 2000, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Gnanarama, Ven. P. 2005, *An Approach to Buddhist Social Philosophy*, Ti-Sarana Buddhist Association, Singapore.
- James, S. P. 2009, 'The Foundations of Buddhist Environmental Ethics: A New Approach', in *Buddhist Approach to Environmental Crisis*, ed. Dion Peoples, Mahachulalongkorn Press, Bangkok, pp. 60-67.
- Meadows, D. H. & Meadows, D. L. & Randers, J. & Behrens, W. W. 1972, *Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind*, Universe Books, New York.
- Millennium Development Goals and post-2015 Development Agenda*, Available at: <http://www.un.org/en/ecosoc/about/mdg.shtml>.
- Ñāṇamoli 2008, *The Three Basic Facts of Existence I: Impermanence (Anicca) – Collected Essays*, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Sri Lanka, Available at: <http://www.bps.lk/olib/wh/wh186.pdf>, pp. 31-37.
- Payutto, Ven. P. A. 1994, *Buddhist Economics: A Middle Way for the Market Place*, Available at: <http://www.urbandharma.org/udharma2/becono.html>.

- Pragati, S. 2008, *Environmental Ethics in Buddhism. A virtues approach*, Routledge, London and New York.
- Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future* 1987, Available at: <http://www.un-documents.net/wced-ocf.htm>.
- United Nations 2000, *United Nations Millennium Declaration*, Available at: <http://www.un.org/millennium/declaration/ares552e.htm>.
- United Nations 2013, *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2013*, United Nations, New York, Available at: <http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/MDG/english/mdg-report-2013-english.pdf>
- We Can End Poverty, Millennium Development Goals and Beyond*, Available at: <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>.
- Wee, V. 2001, “Buddhist Approach to Economic Development”, in *Buddhist Perspective in the Face of the Third Millennium*, Buddhist Fellowship, Singapore, pp. 101-110.
- Welford, R. 2006 ‘Tackling Greed and Achieving Sustainable Development’ in: *Business within Limits. Deep Ecology and Buddhist Economics*, eds. L. Zsolnai & K. J. Ims. Peter Lang Publisher, Bern. pp. 25-57.
- World Conservation Strategy – Living Resource Conservation for Sustainable Development* 1980, International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, Gland, Switzerland.
- Zsolnai, L. 2008, ‘Buddhist Economic Strategy’ in *Frugality*, eds. L. Bouckaert & H. Opdebeeck & L. Zsolnai, Peter Lang Publisher, Bern, pp. 279-304.

REFERENCES FROM THE PĀLI CANON

- SN 56.11, Dhammacakkappavattanasutta
 MN 22, Alagaddūpamasutta
 MN 63, Cūlamāluṅkyasutta
 SN 12.15, Kaccānagottasutta
 SN 22.86, Anurādhassutta