

Virtue Training: Buddhist Response to Sustainable Development and Social Change

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Nowadays the world is active with the global project of sustainable development. Most countries have several policies to sustainably develop their political, economic and educational systems for the betterment of their people. For instance, America provides a seminar project to educate their students on diverse social movements and the struggle for human rights in society.¹ Europe encourages students to study more political, social and economic subjects.² England and Denmark provide more programs in the universities to respond to the international development and social change projects.³ In Asia, countries such as India, Thailand, China and Vietnam have policies to support the socioeconomic development study in their universities.⁴

However, with the most concentrated development on physical substances above, the living styles of people are based more on

1. "International Development & Social Change," Rice University International Program, accessed January 13th, 2014. <http://abroad.Rice.edu>.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

materialism than on ethical concerns. Thus, the global society has been changed more in a negative way. There is a civil war in Syria and political violence in Thailand and the Ukraine. Furthermore there is terrorism in America and the South of Thailand. There are also critical issues of human rights in Argentina, Hong Kong and so on. Moreover, many countries have committed to bringing peace into Syria.

As a result, the developments of materialism do not respond sufficiently to the demands of sustainable development and social change.

From a Buddhist perspective, all subjects arise from a source; to solve a problem we have to discover its cause. In fact, the causes of all conflicts in the world begin from the internal conflict in people's minds. As the mind still retains greed, hatred and delusion, internal conflicts always happen. It affects people's thought, speech, and action in negative ways. People always think more about their benefits and self-interest. Therefore, to develop anything in a society and the world should primarily begin from purifying the minds of people from avaricious feelings and from hate and delusion. Virtue training must be the answer to sustainable development. It must direct the society and the world in the positive way of change.

After his Enlightenment, the Buddha discovered the Law of Nature (*Dhamma*), which allows all beings to live happily and peacefully. He knows that all beings are suffering (*dukkha*) from birth, aging, illness, death, and from the impermanent character of things.⁵

However, the Buddha discovered more importantly that the experience of suffering has its cause (*samudaya*).⁶ The origin of suffering is *Taṇhā* (craving), which is the 'thirst' for forms, flavors, odors, sounds, tangible and mental objects.⁷ It fetters people with pleasures so that they must

5. The Book of the Kindred Sayings (Saṃyutta-Nikāya), tr. F.L. Woodward. Part 5 (London: Pali Text Society, 1979), 357.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

to be born again and again.⁸ This craving is conditioned by ignorance, which hinders people to be ignorant of the realistic nature of objects.⁹

On the way, the Buddha experiences the stage of cessation from suffering (*nirodha*). It is the stage of passionlessness.¹⁰ The mind absents itself from ignorance and craving.

Moreover, the Buddha has found the path (*magga*) to achieve the stage of cessation known as the Noble Eightfold Path. There are right view, right aim, right speech, right action, right living, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration.¹¹

In fact, most people are never concerned that a life has the nature of suffering, but they are joyful with having a life. They misunderstand that the short period of joyfulness gained from pleasures is happiness. Thus, they prefer to hold it permanently with them. With this ignorance, a craving is conditioned in people's minds. Then people try to grasp all the pleasures they can to support their thirsts. With the pleasurable desires, they are less concerned with others, but they think much about themselves. They usually ignore human rights and ethics. It does not matter if the methods they use to earn the pleasures are right or wrong. They will enter into conflict with others if that is the way to succeed in their purposes. This is because ignorance constructs immorality in the mind, speech and action. The Buddha has said that ignorance is the root of unwholesomeness.¹² It causes people to be shameless and fearless in constructing misconduct.¹³ When people are immersed in ignorance, wrong view happens and then arranged into other wrong paths, which are wrong intention, wrong speech, wrong action, wrong livelihood, wrong effort, wrong mindfulness and wrong concentration.¹⁴

8. Ibid.

9. The Book of the Kindred Sayings (Sāṃyutta-Nikāya), tr. F.L. Woodward. Part 3 (London: Pali Text Society, 1975), 146.

10. Op.cit.

11. Ibid. 358.

12. The Book of the Kindred Sayings (Sāṃyutta-Nikāya), tr. T.W. Rhys Davids. Part 2 (London: Pali Text Society, 1982), 153.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

As a result, we can see that the origin of any conflict and violence is within the mind. Thus, to sustainably develop the society and the world in peace, we have to firstly resolve the problem in the people's minds.

The Buddha said that only true knowledge can conquer ignorance.¹⁵ He has suggested the Noble Eightfold Path¹⁶ as the way to achieve that true knowledge. It is the Middle Path which is not sense-pleasures and not self-torment. It is the course to achieve calming, awakening, true knowledge, super-knowledge and *Nibbāna*.¹⁷

The first two paths, which are the right view and the right intention, require people to think in the right way. At least they should have the right understanding and right attitude about the truth of life that the Four Noble Truth is true. Furthermore, they should recognize the three characteristics of things, which are suffering (*dukkha*), impermanence (*anicca*) and unreality (*anatta*). When they have followed this right thinking, they must become concerned with how life is suffering. They will notice that all other beings also have the suffering that they do. They must know that the things are always changing and unreal. They cannot hold anything forever. With the right understanding that life and the many things have a basis of the three characteristics, they would not have much desire for sense-pleasures. In contrast, they would place more consciousness on living. Furthermore, they must try to find the paths that lead away from the suffering. In consequence, they will appreciate and observe the Noble Eightfold Path by practicing right speech, which is not misconduct in words such as, lies, false words, rude speech, teasing, and so on. They will practice the right action and right livelihood to purify their living behaviors. In fact, the Buddha has recommended that the way to keep a livelihood pure in speech and action is the Five Precepts. People who have not observed this course must lose the quality of human being.¹⁸ Therefore, people who want to retain the

15. Ibid.

16. The Book of the Discipline (Vinaya-Piṭaka), tr. I.B. Horner. Vol 4 (London: Pali Text Society, 1982), 16.

17. Ibid. 15.

18. Buddhist Legends: Dhammapada Commentary, tr. Eugene Watson Burlingame. Part 1 (London: Pali Text Society, 1979), 125.

human quality should abstain from destroying the lives of themselves and others, taking things without permission, sexual misconduct, false speech and taking any intoxicants or drugs. However, the course to completely eradicate the sufferings of life is not only purifying speech and action, but also the paths to purification of the mind.

The Buddha suggests further paths for people to follow as right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. After people have purified the verbal and corporal by abstaining from unwholesomeness, their minds will have the quality to be trained to achieve true knowledge. Right effort means people put much effort into accumulating much wholesomeness. This stage must support people's minds into developing consciousness into the higher stages of right mindfulness and right concentration, which are the levels of meditation. With the right practice in meditation, wisdom must appear and the true knowledge will arise. With true knowledge, the ignorance that conditions the craving will be completely destroyed. People's minds will reach the stages of cessation of thirst, calming, and awakening. With the pure mind, people have no feeling of greed, delusion and hatred. They are immerse in happiness because without there are no defilements to interfere with their minds.

As a result, we can see that to follow the Noble Eightfold Path is at least the way to reduce craving from our mind, speech and action. When our minds have less greed, delusion and hatred, the external conflicts and violence with others will happen less.

Moreover, there is a further Buddhist course which we can practice for happiness in life and a peaceful society. In the *Dīgha Nikāya*, Vāsetṭha asked the Buddha the way to be in union with Brahmā, the divinity in the Brahma realm.¹⁹ The Buddha teaches the lessons of the four sublime states (*Brahma Vihāra*), which are loving-kindness, compassion, sympathy and equanimity as the qualities needed to join the Brahma realm.²⁰ Indeed, we can also change our world to be as the

19. The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of *Dīgha-Nikāya*, tr. Maurice Walshe (Boston: Wisdom Publication, 1995), 194.

20. Ibid.

Brahma realm. This means if people observe these four sublime states, they must have the qualities of the divine Brahmās who have universal loving –kindness, compassion and sympathy for others. Furthermore, they also have concentrated their minds to be untouched by anything and unaffected by any sense of suffering or pleasure. Then, when people have universal love for each another, the mundane realm will be as the divine realm which has no violence but is tangible with happiness, calm and peace.

Even though there is violence happening in several countries, some Buddhist communities are trying to train people by the Buddha's teachings. They encourage the people to follow the Noble Eightfold Path by being concerned with the truth that all beings have suffering, that they are under the Law of Action (*Kamma*) and that all things have the three characteristics of *dukkha*, *anicca* and *anatta* according to the right view and right attitude of life. They require people to observe at least the Five Precepts in regard to right speech, right action and right livelihood. They also give courses of meditation to provide people with the training paths of right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. Furthermore, they have shared their universal love and compassion for society by supporting people in education, culture, philanthropy and environmental protection. These Buddhist communities can be found in several countries. However, the strongest communities, distinguished in providing social support, are the Buddhist communities in Taiwan. There are six main Buddhist organizations in Taiwan, which are Tzu Chi Gongdehui, Fo Guang Shan, Fagushan, Chung Tai Chan Szu, Ling Jion Shan and Fu-Chih.²¹ They have the same purpose of building the earth as the Pure Land.²² Thus, they share the same mission of engaging with the society. They begin a moral campaign in schools, campuses and universities by educating personal morality for youth, helping unfortunate people, environmental protection and cultural supports.²³

21. David Schak and Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao, "Taiwan Socially Engaged Buddhist Groups," *China Perspective*, January 18, 2014., <http://chinaperspectives.revues.org/2803>.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

Venerable Taixu has encouraged his disciples to live as bodhisattvas who have universal love and compassion for all beings.²⁴ He has created the Buddhist concept of 'Life Buddhism,' which means that this world is the place for developing and accumulating merit.²⁵ Furthermore, Venerable Yinshun has encouraged people on religious practice and charity activities.²⁶ These are some instances to prove that how Taiwanese Buddhism has tried to create heaven on this earth.

Regarding the Taiwanese Buddhist activities above, we can see that they sustainably develop the society to be prosperous by giving Buddhist morality as the basic of living. When people's minds are trained by virtue, the developments in politics and the economy seem to create less conflict than in other countries.

In summary, virtue training is the core of sustainable development of the society and the world. When People are concerned with the Four Noble Truths, observe the Five Precepts and follow the Noble Eightfold Path, they have shame and fear in constructing any unwholesomeness. Furthermore, with the practice of the four sublime states of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathy and equanimity, conflict and violence will not happen. People become more compromising on any issue. Then, political, economic and social developments will move into a positive change. This means that improving the world has to begin from the mind by training in morality. The government of each country needs to make the project widespread in the country by putting into policy moral training courses in every school, campus and university. Moreover, it is now the right time for the United Nations to take the lead in encouraging people on the moral path for the sustainable development of the world.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

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