

Buddhist perspective on Consumer Ethics and Sustainable development

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‘Sustainable Development’ may be defined as “as the ability to meet the needs of the present while contributing to the future generations’ needs.”¹¹ It is basically an organizing principle for human life on a planet whose resources are finite. This principle postulates a required state in the future for humans in which living conditions and resource-use meet their requirements without the need to undermine their sustainability so that the needs of the future generations are also met. In sustainable development the carrying capacity of natural systems gets inextricably interlinked with the growth and development of society and economy. The concept of ‘sustainability’ came into use in the social sciences from the 1970s when it was put to use to explain an economy “in equilibrium with basic ecological support systems.”²² Research studies in various fields

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1. M.T. Needham, “A Psychological Approach to a Thriving Resilient Community,”
International Journal of Business, Humanities and Technology, vol. 1 no. 3, 2011.

2. R. Stivers, The Sustainable Society: Ethics and Economic Growth, Philadelphia:
Westminster Press, 1976.

have been employed to highlight *The Limits to Growth*.³³ A good example of this is the ‘steady state economy’,⁴⁴ used by economists to address the concerns related to the effect of human development on the planet Earth. UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) has been making major efforts towards building strategies and programs for the realization of sustainable development. Rio+20 and Agenda 21 are an important example of this. An effort in this paper shall also be made to see as to in what way Buddhism can contribute towards the efforts of ECOSOC towards sustainable development.

This paper consists of three parts. In the first part, we have attempted to look at the background to the need for sustainability. The second part, we shall explore the possible efforts and policy changes which may help in achieving sustainable development. In the third part, we shall present Buddhist perspective on the ways and means to achieve sustainable development.

The present age is an age of globalizing economic system. This economic system is profit-based in which the primary interest of an economic organization is to achieve maximum profit so that maximum returns may be provided to the people who have made investments in this particular financial organization. As the primary goal of the managers of the financial organizations is profit maximization, they only concentrate on those activities which bring in profit. Anything that is *uneconomic* is seen as avoidable and hence an effort is made to eliminate it. It has been generally seen that the moral standards of the financial organizations are fairly low. To maximize their profits, they often indulge in activities such as avoidance of payment of tax, avoidance of responsibility for pollution. As the primary priority of these organizations is profit, they also do not care if the products that they produce are of poor quality. Much worse, these organizations also do not pay any attention to the fact that oil, steel, coal, and many other non-renewable resources are getting depleted. A large number

3. D.H. Meadows, D.L. Meadows, J. Randers, and W.W. Behrens III. *The Limits to Growth*. Universe Books, New York, NY, 1972.

4. H.E. Daly, *Towards a Steady State Economy*. San Francisco: Freeman, 1973.

of these organizations function at the multinational level and many of them have monopolies in their fields of specialization. As a result, these organizations are easily able to control the prices through the control of supply and demand.

In the globalizing economic system, the multinational organizations use various means such as the media and propaganda to create more and more demand among the masses for goods. In fact, the present day economic system is a system in which sales persons play the central role. Through these sales persons and through the employment of propaganda craving for more and more material goods is created among the masses. Advertising deliberately fosters a climate of self-involvement, playing on people's needs for security, acceptance, and happiness. By setting up idealized stereotypes, advertisements foster greed, status envy, anxiety, health fears, and at root, a sense of dissatisfaction and inadequacy. Where self-identity merges with product dependency, addictions arise— to brand names, styles, tastes— and certainly to shopping.⁵ The entire society, in fact, is made to believe that the more you consume the better you are. All the companies have growth targets fixed for them and to meet their targets these companies go to all lengths. Here, they do not bother with what exactly is required by people. People are made to go for goods and goods are not exactly produced for people. Over the years multinational organizations have manipulated the psyche of human society to the extent that now it is not unusual for a typical citizen in the developed world to take mortgages and loans that he/she cannot afford. In other words, the present system is not exactly functioning to meet the real needs of humanity but to meet its own needs which are self-defeating. For instance, it is not unusual for typical citizens of the developed world and affluent people in the developing world to throw away their fully functional televisions, mobile phones, and clothes simply because

5. Stephanie Kaza, "Overcoming the Grip of Consumerism," *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, vol. 20, 2000: 28.

better models and designs have appeared in the market. It is rarely realized that resources, including non-renewable resources, are used in the manufacture of these goods.

David Loy considers whether consumption, or in its big form, the Market, has actually become the new world religion.⁶ He describes two unshakable and unchallengeable statements of faith in this religion: (1) growth and enhanced world trade will benefit everyone, and (2) growth will not be constrained by the inherent limits of a finite planet. Science provides the worldview, consumerism provides the value system, and economics serves as theology. From a religious perspective, the power of this new religion lies in its extremely effective conversion techniques. The seductive product messages capture the masses, replacing other religious approaches to the pursuit of meaning in life. One basic flaw of economic religion is, according to Loy, that it depletes rather than builds “moral capital.”⁷ The rule of profit maximization allows producers to evade personal responsibility for people exploited both as laborers and consumers, as well as evasion of moral responsibility for market-ravaged plants and animals, rivers, and soils. The intoxication of over-consumption not only does not provide any true internal peace, it actually feeds anxiety tied to self-identity. A Buddhist alternative, he suggests, are the teachings on renunciation and generosity in which one’s sense of self is tied to nothing, since all things are impermanent.

The worst thing that is happening as a result of the globalizing consumer system is that this system has been responsible for creating greed, jealousy, wastage and above all, severe competition among people as individuals as well as nations. Thus we compete with each other at different levels and indulge in all kinds of immoral and destructive activities. “The hope... that by the single-minded pursuit of wealth, without bothering our heads about spiritual and moral questions, we could establish peace on earth, is an unrealistic,

6. David Loy, “The Religion of the Market,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. 65 (2), 1997: 275-290.

7. *Ibid.*283.

unscientific, and irrational hope... the foundations of peace cannot be laid by... making inordinately large demands on limited world resources and... (putting rich people) on an unavoidable collision course— not primarily with the poor (who are weak and defenceless) but with other rich people.”⁸ It is a well-known fact that a major chunk of the world resources and manpower is wasted in the defense industry. One of the sick elements in our economy is that it needs a large armament industry. Even today, most countries must curtail their expenses for health, welfare, education in order to carry the load of its defense budget. Considering the power of the corporations, the apathy and powerlessness of the large mass of population, the inadequacy of political leaders in almost all countries, the threat of nuclear war, the ecological dangers, not to speak of such phenomena as weather changes that alone could produce famines in large parts of the world, there is hardly a reasonable chance for salvation.

Human greed goes to the extent that artificial scarcities are created by powerful multinationals so that they may be able to maximize their profits. As a consequence of such actions, famines are created in different parts of the world. Now well-documented studies clearly show that the present level of food production is enough for as many as eight billion people.⁹ But the food industry manipulates distribution in such a manner that millions die due to starvation. Occasionally food grains are dumped into the sea by some countries so that they may be able to give an opportunity to the farmers’ lobby to get better prices for their products!

It appears that the consumer society is deeply unaware of the consequences of its collective actions. A central root cause of over-consumption is the ideology of consumerism, promulgated by those who stand to benefit the most from it. Consumerism rests on the assumption that human desires are infinitely expandable. Values

8. E.F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful*, Point Roberts, WA: Hartley & Marks, 1973: 18-19.

9. Fritjof Capra, *The Turning Point: Science, Society, and the Rising Culture*, Toronto: Bantam Books. 1983: 257-258.

associated with consumerism are clustered around the human need for security, belonging, status, and happiness. A country getaway cabin, a slick new car, the right brand of beer— each will give the buyer a sense of relief from the anxiety of not being accepted, from loneliness, and from a feeling of inadequacy. Perhaps strongest of all are the values associated with affluence: having enough to be able to throw away what others could use, having so much that others cannot threaten you, having enough to generate and guarantee certain privileges (premier status travel clubs, for example). As one Wall Street banker put it, in a consumer society, “net worth equals self-worth.”¹⁰ Consumerism is centered around the cultivation of desire. The deliberative method in Buddhism points specifically to the extinguishing of desire as a path to enlightenment. The method consists both of insight into the nature of suffering and desire, and of practices which embody this insight in action.

The globalizing economic system as a result of its inbuilt selfishness has been responsible for the environmental damage, serious damage to the non-renewable resources, pollution, and above all, widening the gap between the rich and the poor. “Our excessive consumption and our strong emphasis on high technology not only create massive quantities of waste but also require huge amounts of energy. Nonrenewable energy, derived from fossil fuels, powers most of our production processes and with the decline of these natural resources energy itself has become a scarce and expensive resource. In their attempts to maintain, and even increase, their current levels of production, the world’s industrialized countries have ferociously exploited the available resources of fossil fuels. These processes of energy production have the potential to cause unprecedented ecological disturbances and human suffering.”¹¹ It is true that the poor also have been responsible for damaging the system to some extent. But the poor do the damage out of their desperation to survive. But the rich and the affluent do the damage due to their extravagant and

10. Kaza, *Op. Cit.*31.

11. Capra, *Op. Cit.*237.

greedy life-styles. For example, "It has been estimated that the birth of an American baby would represent more than fifty times... as great a threat to the environment as the birth of an Indian baby."¹² Population explosion has also added to the problems as humans have multiplied themselves to the extent that something seriously needs to be done to ensure that the population bomb does not take us beyond the brink. According to James Lovelock, "We have grown in number to the point where our presence is perceptibly disabling the planet like a disease."¹³ As our population, consumption, and technological skills expand, the probability of a vast catastrophe looms steadily larger.¹⁴ It is absolutely essential to maintain substantial tracts of wilderness for the enjoyment of outdoors enthusiasts and hermits. Resource use, waste production, and environmental degradation are accelerated by population growth. They are further exacerbated by consumption habits. Humanity has already reached a dangerous turning point in its domination of the planet. "The same genius that allowed us to achieve that dominance now must be harnessed if we are to prevent our very success from sealing our doom."¹⁵ High rates of consumption are driving environmental destruction just as fast if not faster than rising population. At the 1992 Rio Summit in Brazil, representatives of southern countries demanded that high-consuming northern countries examine their own contribution to the environmental crisis rather than placing blame elsewhere.

Managers and policy-planners in the present-day economic system believe that by meeting the material needs of mankind they can create a happy and peaceful world. But this is wrong. As pointed by the famous Erich Fromm, material needs i.e., the complete satisfaction of those needs which we shares with the animals is important but not a sufficient condition for sanity and mental health. According to

12. Ken Jones, *Beyond Optimism: A Political Buddhist Ecology*, Oxford: Jon Carpenter, 1993: 14.

13. P.R., Ehrlich, A.H. Ehrlich, "Population Bomb Revisited," *The Electronic Journal of Sustainable Development*, 3 (1), 2009: 65.

14. T. Homer-Dixon, *The Upside of Down: Catastrophe, Creativity, and the Renewal of Civilization*, Washington, DC: Island Press, 2006: 213.

15. Ehrlich and Ehrlich, *Op. Cit.* 69.

him, "Happiness and peace depend on the satisfaction of those needs and passions which are specifically human."¹⁶ In other words, there cannot be any peace as long as spiritual needs are not balanced with material needs of humans.

The consumer based globalizing economic system, as shown above, has been primarily responsible for creating pollution, depletion of non-renewable resources, and hunger and poverty in the world because it has been chasing unbridled development. This system has no inbuilt limitations and it completely ignores the fact that the planet Earth has limited resources. Nothing is more telling about our selfishness than that we go on plundering the raw materials of the earth, poisoning the earth, and preparing nuclear war.

As suggested in the *Brundtland Report*,¹⁷ in order to attain sustainable development, the uncontrolled population increase needs to be brought under control. The best way to do this is to provide education to women in the third world and empower them economically. The power of patriarchy, which is all-pervasive but bound to decline, until recently, had rarely been challenged openly, and its doctrines were so universally accepted that they seemed to be laws of nature. Such a mentality based on philosophical, social, and political systems "in which men—by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor—determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male."¹⁸ In the words of Capra, "Exploitation of nature has gone hand in hand with that of women, who have been identified with nature throughout the ages. From the earliest times nature- and especially the earth- was seen as a kind and nurturing mother, but also as a wild and uncontrollable female. In pre-patriarchal eras her many aspects were identified with the numerous manifestations of the Goddess.

16. Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1955: 67.

17. World Commission on the Environment and Development. 1987. *Our Common Future* [The Brundtland Report], Oxford: Oxford University Press.

18.. Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*, New York: Bantam, 1977: 40.

Under patriarchy the benign image of nature changed into one of passivity, whereas the view of nature as wild and dangerous gave rise to the idea that she was to be dominated by man. At the same time women were portrayed as passive and subservient to men. With the rise of Newtonian science, finally, nature became a mechanical system that could be manipulated and exploited, together with the manipulation and exploitation of women. The ancient association of woman and nature thus interlinks women's history and the history of the environment, and is the source of a natural kinship between feminism and ecology which is manifesting itself increasingly."¹⁹ It has been found that literate women with sufficient financial support tend to have fewer and healthier children. If this can be done, then a major part of the problem shall get taken care of. Further, equitable distribution of resources among not only different nations of the world but also among human and between the genders needs to be done. Simplistic life-style is another important aspect of human life which needs to be emphasized. The affluent societies waste and consume too much. They need to downsize and reduce their needs to the extent that wanton wastage of resources can be put to a stop.

As pointed out by Richard Payne, "Perhaps as a consequence of our evolutionary history, the personal human self is motivated by a deep sense of insufficiency... The Buddha's diagnosis for our suffering, unease, and dissatisfaction is this pervasive feeling of existing in a state of insufficiency. Insufficiency (*taṇhā*, sometimes translated as craving) is not simply need. Needs can be fulfilled, but as long as we cling to the sense of self as a separate, independent, unchanging reality there will be a disparity between the actuality and the imagined— a disparity that is experienced as an insufficiency."²⁰ Perhaps the most important Buddhist prescription for sustainable development is universal adoption of voluntary simplicity, non-wasteful attitude and satisfaction (*santutṭhi*) with minimum. The

19. Fritjof Capra, Op. Cit. 40.

20. Richard K. Payne, (ed.), How Much is Enough?: Buddhism, Consumerism, and the Human Environment, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2010: 2.

best example of this is in the Aggañña Sutta of the *Dīgha Nikāya*²¹ where the Buddha relates the story of a glutton (*udumbarakhādika*).²² In this story, a person, while passing through a forest, comes across a fig-tree laden with fruit. He shakes the tree till all the fruit fall down and then eats a few and walks away. The Buddha points out that this is typical of an irresponsible person as there was no need for him to waste so many fruit. If we take from nature only to the extent that nature can recover from it, then none of our valuable resources shall get depleted. This is a wonderful example to be follow if we need to achieve sustainable development.

The Buddha also points at another place that poverty and unequal distribution of resources is primarily responsible for crime and violence in the world. Most of the crime and violence are committed by deprived people. Thus, there is need to allow people an equitable access to resources. An ideal Buddhist society would follow the ideal of the happiness and welfare of maximum number of people (*bahujana hitāya bahujana sukhāya*).²³ The Buddha pointed out that, “goods not being bestowed on the destitute poverty grew rife; from poverty growing rife stealing increased, from the spread of stealing violence grew apace, from the growth of violence, the destruction of life became common”²⁴ The need is to liberate human beings from those socioeconomic and political conditions that make people inhuman—prisoners of things, machines, and their own greed.

From a Buddhist perspective, unbridled modernism and westernization is primarily responsible for many of the major problems that we face today. A modern Buddhist scholar, for instance, has pointed out that “Modernity is rejected because it is seen as a form of life that has in a short period of time despoiled the landscape and done

21. T.W. Rhys Davids and J.E. Carpenter, (eds.), *The Dīgha Nikāya*, vol. 3, London: Pali Text Society, 1890-1911: 80-98.

22. Feer, M.L. (ed.), *The Saṃyutta Nikāya*. vol.4, London: Pali Text Society, 1884-1898: 283.

23. V. Oldenberg (ed.), *The Vinaya Piṭaka*. Vol. 1, London: Pali Text Society, 1879-1883: 21.

24. Rhys Davids and J.E. Carpenter, *Op. Cit.* 67.

irreparable damage to the environment.”²⁵ Buddhism suggests that though material satisfaction is important, the real needs of humans are spiritual. Buddhism considers, thus, both poverty and extravagancy harmful. One of the applications of the Middle Path (*aṭṭhangiko maggo*) applies to this aspect of life. Those who have surplus wealth must share it with the poor people and/or donate it for public welfare. A person with craving for wealth is considered as the sign of an ignorant person causing harm to himself and others.²⁶ A wealthy person who enjoys his wealth all by himself is viewed as a person who has failed as a human being.²⁷ It is in this sense that Buddhist doctrines of *dāna*, *mettā*, and *karuṇā* become extremely relevant.

To build a healthy society, restraint, compassion, liberality, and generosity must be encouraged. A Buddhist concept of economic development avoids gigantism, especially of machines, which tend to control rather than serve human beings. Our economy is already big enough and our technologies are too smart and too powerful. What is most needed is streamlining and downsizing, especially cutting weapons production, industries dedicated to wasteful luxuries, and conspicuous consumption as the engine that drives the economy. Instead, technologies need to be more humble, humane, and benign towards the total biosphere. We need to cease trying to satisfy nonmaterial needs with material goods. For Buddhists, material satisfaction merely provides a starting point for the pursuit of higher goals. Spiritual health and material well-being are not enemies; they are natural allies.

25. L. Lancaster, L. “The Buddhist Traditions in the Contemporary World: History and Critique,” a keynote speech made at the opening ceremony of the Fourth Chung-Hwa International Conference on Buddhism, January 18-20, 2002: 1-2.

26. K.T.S. Sarao (trans), *The Dhammapada: A Translator=s Guide*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2009: 355.

27. V. Fausböll (ed.), *The Sutta-Nipāta*. London: Pali Text Society, 1985: 102.

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