

BUDDHIST APPROACH TO GLOBAL LEADERSHIP & SHARED RESPONSIBILITY FOR SUSTAINABLE SOCIETIES

by S. R. Bhatt*

“Caratha bhikkhave Carikam

Bahujanahitaya bahujana sukhaya lokanukampaya

Atthaya, hitaya, sukhaya

Devamanussanam”.

“O Monks! Move around everywhere for the well-being of everyone, for the happiness of everyone, showering compassion on the entire world; for the good, for the welfare, for the happiness of divine and human”.

Vinaya pitaka I.23.

I am indeed happy and feel privileged to partake in this International conference. I am thankful to the organizers, particularly to Most venerable Dr. Thich Nhat Tu for inviting me. I congratulate them for conceiving this theme as the subject is of great global importance and needed for meeting the demands of the present times. The theme of the conference is also significant in the context of the view that 21st century belongs to Asia to lead the world and Buddhist modes of thinking and living can and should provide new insights and fresh approaches to the present day turbulent world. There are some noble and sublime ideas and ideals in Buddhist thought which the world has to emulate for universal peace, prosperity and wellness.

*. Prof. Dr., Chairman, Indian Philosophy Congress. Former Chairman, Indian Council of Philosophical Research, Government of India. Former Professor & Head, Department of Philosophy, University of Delhi, India.

As we acutely feel, all is not well in the contemporary existential scenario and this calls for a paradigm shift in our value-perceptions, in our modes of thinking and in our ways of living. We are passing through a critical period struggling between best possibilities and worst possibilities. At the present juncture humankind is facing a crisis which is manifold and multi-dimensional. Human existence is stationed at a crossroad. It is a time when forces of unity and harmony can triumph, and marvels of science and technology can be used to ameliorate human suffering and ensure quality of life, precisely at this time forces of terror and violence and impulses of lower human nature are advancing menacingly on a global scale. The ratiocinative human mind is confronted with a dilemma as to how to respond to the present scenario. Rationality in which humanity has placed great trust for realization of its ideals of true knowledge and authentic existence appears to have been overtaken by hurricane of unreason and blind faith and basal passions. It has therefore become imperative to explore deeper and higher dimensions of human resources by means of which we can successfully work for the victory of the ideals and values which have inspired onward march of civilizations. Moving ahead in twenty first century with rich, diverse and varied heritage humankind is still searching for new paradigms, looking for new insights, novel intuitions and fresh approaches and therefore there is a need for serious 'rethinking' on the part of knowledgeable persons all over the world. There is a wide spread misapprehension about the nature and meaning of Reality and human existence and consequent all round global erosion of values, loss of dignity and authenticity in life, and predominance of disvalues masquerading as true values.

1. RELEVANCE OF BUDDHA'S TEACHINGS

The advent of Sakyamuni, the Buddha, initially the light of Asia and now of the entire world, has been a significant event in the history of world culture and civilization. Born in a royal family with all material prosperity and physical comforts, he was awakened by the pain and suffering, finitude and evanescence of the mundane life. After intensive study, deep reflections and profound meditation he gained insight into the nature of Reality and the phenomenal world. Having attained enlightenment he did not remain self-centered. He

was not contented with his own emancipation and longed for the liberation of all suffering beings. He showed to the humanity the sure path of *Nirvana*, a way to eradicate suffering and to escape from the labyrinth of the cycle of birth and death (*bhava cakra*), which consisted of a symbiosis of wisdom (*prajna*) and conduct (*sila*), compassionate ethics and meditative practice. He visualized the “Four Eternal Truths” (*Catvari Arya Satyani*) and practiced them in the form of “Eternal Eight-fold Path” (*Arya Astangika Marga*) in his own life and being assured of their veracity subsequently moved around to enlighten people about it. The *nidana* (*diagnosis*) and the *upaya* (*curative measures*) put forth by him were so efficaciously redeeming that during his life time itself people revered him as *Bhaisajya Guru* (‘Great Healer’), *Tayin* (Great Savior), *Buddha* (Enlightened Seer), *Sarvajna* (Omniscient Person) and *Sugata* (i.e., one who has visualized and realized the *summum bonum* of life). The teachings of Lord Buddha are very much relevant in modern times. Buddhist thought being a systematic and critical reflection on our lived experiences has the avowed task of providing a way out from this labyrinth with its liberating knowledge and wisdom and therefore it is the onus of responsibility on those who are exposed to Buddhist modes of thinking and ways of living to put forth fresh thinking and newer pathways by way of creative interpretations of teachings of the Buddha and come out with innovative paradigms of value-pursuits to guide the humanity. There is need to address the imminent problems facing the humankind and provide genuine, effective and efficacious solutions failing which the rich and varied Buddhist culture will cease to be relevant to contemporary needs and aspirations.

Against this background it is hoped that Buddhist thought, which is at once both ancient and contemporary, with its rationalistic philosophy of interdependence, reciprocity, and mutual care and share, universal love and compassion, fellowship and participation, can offer an effective and more beneficial alternative to the present day individualistic, materialistic, competitive and consumerist view of life and reality. There are some seminal ideas, ideals and guiding principles contained in Buddhist thought which may help humanity from its present plight and

provide for new social, economic and political order at local and global levels from Buddhist perspectives.

The world at the present juncture cares for Buddhism because of its rich philosophical ideas and practices. It is therefore imperative that philosophical content and philosophical interpretation are at the center stage in order to see their possible applications for contemporary life in modern society. Buddhist philosophy embodies experiential data and critical enquiry, phenomenological reflections and psychological analysis. They provide the kernel and essence to Buddhist thought and culture. The world of scholarship today is replete with new understandings and reappraisals of old scholarship and therefore theoretical and philosophical contents of Buddhist have to be applied to eradicate human suffering.

2. HARMONIOUS LIVING AND SHARING FUTURE

In this era of globalization and rapid transport system the world has shrunk giving rise to co- existence of multiple cultures which demands peaceful and harmonious living for betterment and wellness. But it has to be holistic globalization involving peaceful coexistence, reciprocal cooperation and mutual caring and sharing. In other words, it should not be mere economic globalization confined to trade and commerce but spiritual one which is all comprehensive in which everyone partakes and gets benefitted. The mode of any such strategic planning and execution with enduring and comprehensive development and health and happiness for the parties involved are usually based on their mutual understanding and sharing of historical past, the present state of affairs and the future prospects. This requires mutual give and take without any selfish consideration. This has to be at the global, regional and local levels all simultaneously. What is needed is a holistic and integral approach, which is all-inclusive and all-comprehending. It takes into account the reality in its non-manifest unitary nature as well as in its manifested diversified form. This organic view accommodates all opposites as distinct. It is not negative and exclusive and therefore it defies the logic of dichotomies. It accepts pure experience of self-awareness at the transcendental level and a relational logic of complex interactions at the empirical level. One is depth level and the other is surface level. One is the level of the

whole and the other is the level of parts within the whole. The one is in many and the many is in one. The basic idea is that one and many are not incompatible but mutually reinforcing, as they are two facets of the same reality. The Avatamsaka Sutra (The Flower Ornament Scripture) gives the analogy of Jewel-net in which each jewel reflects the rest of the jewels all at once and all appearing at once in one jewel. If you are in one jewel you are in all directions because in one jewel there are all the jewels. Hua-yen Buddhism of China is based on this scripture and highlights this point. As Hua-yen Buddhism puts it:

*'In one is all, in many is one,
One is identical to all, many is identical to one'*

The central Buddhist doctrine of *Pratityasamutpada* represents this fact of interconnection, interdependence and inter-penetration of all phenomena and the 'implicate order' prevailing in the cosmos. The *Dharmakaya* is the universal field all-pervasive, all-accommodating, all-unifying and all-penetrating. There is nothing apart from It and outside It. But within It there is infinite multiplicity all intertwined like flowers in a garland.

The cosmos is a vast and subtle inter-netting of multiple interrelated and interdependent existences which are in a constant flux. It has physical, mental and spiritual dimensions. There is determinism at the physical level but freedom and spontaneity at the spiritual level. The mental realm is partly determined and partly free. The human being is an organic unity of psycho-physical processes animated by spiritual element.

3. SPIRITUAL GLOBALIZATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The term 'sustainable development' is a fashionable catch word these days and it has acquired popular currency. But we have to be clear about its precise meaning. Human being does not live by bread alone, that food, shelter and clothing, though basic and most essential, they are not the sole requirements of human life and that instead of conflict, cooperation and mutual support are more basic to human survival. So when there is talk of quality of life and standard of living, it has not to be just materialistic because along with a body and mind human being has a spirit as well. The *welfarism*

and *sustainable development* propounded in Buddhist thought is not materialistic but holistic *welfarism* in which the welfare of not only an individual but the whole humanity and the entire cosmos is taken into consideration. It is spiritualistic *welfarism* that envelops but also transcends material well-being.

In the light of the above averments in this paper an attempt is made to take the connotation of the phrase 'sustainable development' out of its materialistic confinements and provide it widest possible meaning by using it in the sense of *total* or *all-round* development because that alone is really sustainable. Any development concerning only a part of the Reality can never provide genuine and lasting happiness. On the basis of this logic therefore I make this unconventional usage by tempering and seasoning the materialistic perspective with a spiritualistic perspective and thereby widening the canvas of our deliberations encompassing all that which has not hitherto been included. It is a radically different usage no doubt, but perhaps it is more meaningful in deeper human context.

"Let everyone be happy. Let everyone be without hunger and disease. Let everyone experience the good and the noble and let no one meet with suffering."

Reminding us and the whole human race of this sublime aspiration and lofty goal, let us march in the 21st century with full preparedness for total and over-all development of not only the human kind but of the entire cosmos. It is with this sanguine expectation that this paper is presented as a model of a total and integrated development from holistic perspective, because this is *really significant and worthwhile* sustainable developmental perspective.

The Buddhist perspective of development represented by the terms '*svasti*', '*sivam*', '*kalyana*', '*mangala*', etc. meaning universal well-being has been genuinely sustainable by virtue of its being holistic, integrated, all-comprehensive and futuristic taking into account individual, social and cosmic dimensions of existence in its material as well as spiritual aspects. It envisages no incompatibility or antagonism or conflict among these, as they are all conceived and experienced as inter-related and inter-dependent elements of

one and the same whole. The model of their interrelationship put forth in Buddhist thought is not that of mutual conflict but that of mutual cooperation, and mutual enhancement. That is why instead of talking in the divisive language it could talk in the integrative phraseology of not to usurp what legitimately does not belong to us and not to accumulate whatever is more than required as bare necessary. All these may sound irrelevant or meaningless or utopian to a materialistic mind but the spiritualistic vision of sages and seers have always projected these lofty ideals as supreme human objectives that are realizable and worthy of realization by a rational, free and responsible human being.

Another salient feature of Buddhist perspective is that it has always talked of welfare rather than empowerment, *dharma* (responsibility) rather than rights. Acquisition of the material resources *and* enjoyment of those material resources always require proper management through *dharma*. *Dharma* is the regulating principle and Buddhist culture has always denounced pursuit of matter and material comforts without being regulated by *dharma*. The present day consumerism is an unabashed revival of the discredited materialistic ideology that has been doing immense damage to human psyche.

Projecting the inspiring ideal of the entire cosmos being one family or a global village the Buddhist culture has tried to inculcate the attitude of seeing self-sameness everywhere and of being engaged in the well-being of all existence *without* any selfish consideration. We find highest expression of this thought in the *Bodhicaryavatara* of Santideva. Hatred and malice towards none, friendliness and compassion for all, absence of deprivation and exploitation in all respects, this has been the quintessence of Buddhist culture.

Only such ennobling and exalting visions, aspirations and realizations, only such a heightened sense of spirituality, have enabled the Buddhist seers and sages and statesmen to propound the world renowned principles of *pancasila* of mutual understanding, mutual respect, mutual tolerance, mutual accommodation and mutual interface at national and international levels which alone can provide a genuine basis of sustainable development.

4. PRESENT DAY MELONCHOLY SITUATION

Let me take this opportunity to point out how our lopsided materialistic approach to development has resulted today in multiplication of disparity and deprivation, injustices and imbalances, subjugation and inequalities. There has been all-round moral degeneration resulting in alarming rise in crime and corruption. There is no denying of the fact that during 19th and 20th centuries there has been rapid and tremendous progress in science, technology and in all walks of material life. But the fruits of all this progress have not only been inequitably distributed but they have also been counter-productive and evanescent. Never there have been such disasters and destructions threatening annihilation of life and existence. The way pollution is increasing and the rate at which crimes and criminals are mushrooming makes us doubt as to whether it is a development sustainable and worthwhile. One has only to visit the cluster of slums to see the quality of life people are leading.

5. NEED FOR TRUE KNOWLEDGE OF REALITY

In fact on a wider scale the entire cosmos is a unitary and integrated life-support system. Only our improper and imperfect understanding of it results in problems like the ones that have forced us to talk of sustainability. There are two things we have to note here. First, we should have the realization that the world of matter is a global common possession. It is *distributively* shareable and all of us must share it for our mutual enhancement. There is a limit to our capacity to enjoy it and we should not hoard it beyond that limit.

The second thing to be noted is that Nature has the inherent capacity of self-regulation and self-preservation. It possesses sustainability and resilience. It can absorb to some extent external shocks and stresses caused by human follies but let us not interfere in this natural functioning of Nature and let us allow it to have renewable resource management. But all this requires proper understanding of Nature and proper practices towards Nature. We have to cooperate with Nature in order to enable it to cooperate with us. Here, again, Buddhist perspective becomes helpful. In Buddhist philosophy we have a very perceptive account of *prakṛti*,

i.e. cosmic matter that is the matrix of the entire material evolution. It is regarded as of great value to us, the conscious beings. It is kind and benevolent to us. It is rich and bountiful and takes delight in serving us and does so dispassionately. But it is very tender and delicate. It feels shy of exploitation and abuse. So it needs to be cared and looked after with love, affection and adoration. It is very aptly compared to a cow and a delicate dancer who serves us but feels hurt if exploited. Likewise Nature also serves us but reacts when exploited and abused. It does so mildly initially to warn us, to correct us, to make us rectify the wrongs we do to it. But if even then we do not pay any heed, it reacts violently. What Nature wants is judicious use of its resources for progress and prosperity and not uncared and indiscriminate exploitation. Nature will provide us nourishment and peace only if we live in peace with Nature. Worship of Nature has been the keynote of Indian way of life. So if Indian culture enjoins worship of reverence to trees and plants, rivers and mountains, land and animals, heaven and earth, it is not an exhibition of primitive animism as some mistaken scholars may tend to believe but it is a display of our concern and regard for Nature which sustains us and provides us nourishment.

The need of 21st century for sustainable development is to stop the mad game of antagonizing Nature and to befriend it once again. Here in alone lies the sure path to progress and prosperity. For this purpose we shall have to humanize science and technology and make humanities scientific. Education for sustainable development is therefore the call of the day and sooner we realize it the better it is for our survival and quality of life.

6. THREE-FOLD TRANSFORMATION

Any holistic model of sustainable development should take into account the three-fold transformation of human individual, human society and the cosmos. This should be the end-all and be-all of all planning and strategies of development at the global level. Then only it can be a total development which can be really sustainable and enduring.

Transformation and regeneration of human individual is the first and foremost requirement. It stands for development of all

dimensions of human personality— physical, mental, intellectual, moral and spiritual. Mere physical or mental or intellectual development is lopsided and can never be sustainable. This requires a value-oriented scheme of education a blue-print of which could be prepared by a world body like UNESCO and which could be universally adopted by suitable modification according to the regional needs and aspirations and conditions. The ideal situation is to have a global planning and strategy. This of course may appear utopian dream but given wisdom and will it is not unrealizable.

Social transformation is another foundation of sustainable development. It is establishment of a social order and organization in a democratic form in which equality is seasoned with justice, and freedom is tempered with discipline, where tolerance is a guide to mutual relations and cooperation is the law of interaction, where there is practice of democracy in thought, words and deeds. But this again requires a proper type of education in social living.

Transformation of nature is the third pre-requisite of sustainable development. It consists of all such policy efforts that enable us to safeguard the natural capital stock of all five material elements (*pancabhuta*) of earth, water, fire, air and space, in such a manner that it does not get polluted and depleted. It means that in Nature there should be no negative change, no environmental degradation, no agricultural clearance of forests, no housing on agricultural land, no extinction of forest flora and fauna and Natural live stock, etc. On the contrary, there should be positive change by forest resource management, land, water, air and space resource management, etc. Simultaneously there should be supporting efforts like check in population growth, revival of traditional sustainable practices, etc. These days there is a growing awareness of all these policy measures. It is unfortunate that given the present human psychology all these policies and programs mostly remain confined to papers only and nothing concrete and practical is being done though statistics may show otherwise.

Sustainable development is both a view point and a course of action, a policy instrument and a global movement for a new international order based on enlightened spiritual principles aiming at enhancement of quality of life of the entire cosmos and

not just of human beings. We live by hope and we may hope that saner sense will prevail upon human race for doing the needful in this regard. Let us pray that, “Let us live together, eat together and work together. Let our intellect be pure and bright. Let us not be jealous of each other”.

7. ESTABLISHMENT OF HARMONIOUS CIVIL SOCIETY

Goal

Our goal should be to establish a global society of interdependence and interrelationship. This means we have to care for each other and one another, not to deprive others from their legitimate belongings. Every one is a part and parcel of this vast universe and everyone has to have its existence and sustenance in the world. It is the duty and obligation of each one to ensure that the existence and living of everyone is safeguarded and not endangered. But we have only to satisfy our legitimate needs and should not cater to our greed. So the principle of austerity enjoins to stock only that much which we need. This will guarantee intra-generational and inter-generational justice. Equality and justice go hand in hand. They are the two pillars of good theory of management. These are the most desirable prerequisites of sustainable development and environment stewardship.

It must be stated that pursuit of excellence (paramitas) and striving for betterment of life have been perennial human concerns and aspirations. Freedom from imperfection and consequent suffering has been the main motivating factor for all human enterprises. But this has to be a global vision and a universal realization without any prejudice to any section of the universe. This should be the implication of the Buddha’s saying, “Bahujana hitaya bahujana sukhaya” This realization requires propagation and practice of global ethics.

Means

In fact all social, economic and political organizations are established and aimed at this requirement. They have to serve human needs and requirements but are to be properly managed to serve the purposes for which they are established. There are

two broad stages of human enterprises. They are production, and thereafter distribution and enjoyment. The guiding principles of production are to use the resources judiciously so that they are protected for further use and not depleted. Further usability is natural and their depletion is unnatural. The second stage is augmentation of resources and generation of newer and newer resources. This is what is meant by sustainable development. Environmental stewardship and eco-friendliness is a part of this strategy. But real ecology is mental ecology as it is the mind which generates good or perverted human endeavour. This is professional ethics. It is an efficient management of end, means and modalities. After production comes distribution and use. Fair and just distribution and legitimate use or enjoyment both are needed for intra-generational and intergenerational justice. The policy of corporate living, of caring and sharing, implies that we have to care for the present generation as well as for the future generations to come. But ultimately all human endeavours and enterprises should be a means to and directed towards the realization of cosmic well-being which is the *summum bonum* of life. The practice of austerity demands observance of restraint in consumption. It stands for curbing of desires, and taking that much which is necessary for existence. There should be no boundless greed, uncontrolled. One has to set limit to personal acquisition, wants and unnecessary consumption. These imply practice of inter-generational justice apart from intra-general justice. This is our universal responsibility.

8. GOAL OF HUMAN LIFE AND GLOBALLY SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

The pursuits of excellence, striving for betterment and attainment of quality of life have been perennial human concerns and aspirations. All human endeavors in diverse fields of culture and civilization have been directed towards realization of this goal. Freedom from imperfection and consequent suffering has been the chief motivating factors for all cognitive enterprises and technological advancements. Though every human being cherishes and strives for these and posits them as goal of life, their realization requires planned corporate efforts. It cannot be a single individual enterprise. A single individual may work out a plan but its execution has to be collective. Moreover, this goal implies

attainment of excellences and best possible quality of life not only of the individual but also of the entire cosmos since the two are interrelated and interdependent and constitute an organic whole and therefore also it calls for collective efforts. This apart, one cannot attempt to realize a good quality of life keeping in view an isolated individual, society, nation or region. It has to be a global vision and a universal realization without any prejudice to any one section of the universe. Everyone has to participate and partake in the fruits of this venture that is a collective enterprise. Everyone should be able to contribute by manifestation of one's capabilities through a dynamic discovery of one's potentials being assisted in this process by the society and natural surroundings. So when we plan for social progress our outlook should be global though our performance has to be at the local level. Genuine social progress consists in the realization of universal well-being, in a sense of care and concern for all, a feeling of oneness with all, an attitude of sharing and cooperating. For this collective enterprise all cultures of the world have to come together, share a common platform and work for universal progress and prosperity.

9. GLOBAL SHARING OF COMMON PLATFORM

In order to ensure that co-existence of different cultures is peaceful and for mutual benefit there is a need to share a common platform and have a direct interface and dialogue or polylogue. Such cross-cultural interactions will not only help and contribute to build up mutual understanding, mutual trust, mutual empathy and mutual enrichment; they will also consolidate and vitalize the common spiritual and material roots and resources. This will enable us to appreciate more the integral and holistic perspective as against the divisive and dichotomous world-view. May we through this Conference call upon, without being parochial, all intellectuals, scholars, experts in various fields and walks of life to look at each other more closely, to discover our commonalities, to take stock of as each other's strength and weakness, to learn from each other's experiences and lessons so that all countries may march into the future centuries and millennia as partners in universal well-being, as intimate neighbours and cultural cousins.

At the present juncture of time humanity is passing through turmoil and facing a crisis which is manifold and multi-dimensional. Humanity is stationed at a cross road. On the one hand there are marvels of science and technology, on the other there are value-erosions, moral degeneration, and different types of deprivations leading to tensions, strife and suffering. Besides this problems arising out of globalization are also compelling the ratiocinative human mind to seek for new philosophy of life. With the emergence of global society in which we are interacting with people of different ideas and ideals, cultures and traditions, religious and moral norms there arises the increasing need for a global ethics of mutuality and interdependence and inter-cultural dialogue for new set of appropriate interpersonal relationships. In the present times our traditional cultures are getting distorted and are facing the terrible danger of extinction under the perverting influence of the so-called modernization which is divisive, depriving and destructive. For the first time since their inception such a large scale threatening situation has arisen. We have not so far sincerely cared to share a common platform to meet the challenge in a decisive and global way may be due to ignorance, negligence, self-centeredness or bewitchment with modernization etc. A time has come for the initiation of a cultural renaissance, a paradigm shift in our views and ways of life for which the teachings of ancient sages and seers can play a vital and pivotal role. A renewal of cross cultural interactions under this banner will not only help and contribute to mutual understanding, mutual empathy and mutual enrichment; it will also consolidate our common spiritual roots and resources. It will enable us to appreciate the spiritual, holistic and integral perspective as against the divisive and dichotomous world-view.

10. CONCLUSION

By way of concluding it can be said that the Buddha was one of the most revolutionary thinkers and the holiest persons ever lived on the earth. His message of truth, peace, harmony, compassion, altruistic service, selflessness etc. is as relevant today as it was in the past. His advocacy of pursuit of *prajna* and practice of *karuna*, his vision of selfsameness with everyone (*paratma samata* and *paratma parivartana*) and zealous longing for eradication of

suffering of others as one's own cross all barriers of race, creed, country and even humanity. His benevolent teachings of universal compassion and cosmic goodwill, his emphasis on noble virtues of *maitri*, *karuna*, *mudita* and *upeksa* known as *Brahmaviharas* (i.e., living and working for totality or for the whole universe) all these have a significant message for the present-day distracted humankind suffering from exhaustion of spirit and languishing in the narrow and rigid confinements of ego-centrism, violence, parochialism and disastrous materialistic consumerism, perverted modernism etc.
