

# THE ADAPTABILITY OF BUDDHISM TO THE CHANGES OF MODERN SOCIETY

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## ABSTRACT

*With the rapid progress in science and technology, every issue in life nowadays seems to be clarified by human beings through the lens of science. From personal, family, social, psychological issues to spiritual ones, different branches of sciences have been showing their important roles. Moreover, from the most distant planets such as the Moon and Mars to the end of the ocean, the magic wand of science has been gradually shedding light on things that have long been a mystery to the understanding of human-beings. Many mysteries, including the real ones or the ones that science has not been able to decode yet, have been divinized by humans and have become objects of beliefs and religions. However, in the light of science, the true nature of unreal mysteries has been gradually emerging. What is inconsistent with science, with the humans' benefits, including the areas of belief and religion, has been constantly being eliminated. Even the values of material and spiritual culture or social and religious organizations, which have proven their value in the process of survival and development but do not adapt to social changes, are also forgotten by humans, especially in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution or the Industry 4.0. This is a great concern to many people, especially those in the areas of belief and religion!*

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*So what will the future of Buddhism be like? What are the roles of Buddhism in the modern society? What does Buddhism have to do to meet human needs in this era of 4.0? This is one of the most important topics of the Vesak Festival - 2019 held in Hanoi, Vietnam.*

## 1. THE PURPOSE AND MISSION OF BUDDHISM

Before finding out the answers to the above-mentioned questions, we need to redefine what the purpose of Buddhism is, what roles Buddhism plays when existing in this life. The above questions will be answered through the following teaching of Buddha: “Bhikkhus, both formerly and now what I teach is suffering and the cessation of suffering.”<sup>(1)</sup> In other words, as long as people on this planet were completely out of suffering, then human beings would not need the existence of Buddhism in this life any more. The mission of Buddhism would be completed only if this world turned into a world of ultimate bliss! However, the suffering of people in this world from the past until now seems to have never been minimized. The sufferings of birth, aging, sickness, and death, as well as the suffering of being unable to obtain what one desires, the suffering of having to part from those whom one loves, etc., remain in human life. In addition, human suffering seems to be more and more serious when people are bringing suffering to each other for the purpose of satisfying their own craving for sensual pleasures (*kāma-taṇhā*), craving for existence (*bhava-taṇhā*), and craving for non-existence (*vibhava-taṇhā*). To satisfy these three types of craving, people are becoming more selfish and colder.

The phenomenon of lacking empathy for each other, even for parents, children, relatives, neighbors, is a serious illness of the society. Never in human history have there been more warnings about the threats of human existence such as war, robbery, murder, crisis of living environment, natural disasters, and epidemics as in the contemporary world. The Secretary-General of the United Nations’ speech to the world of Buddhists on the Day of UN Vesak in Thailand in 2018 illustrated the above arguments: *The world faces numerous challenges, from conflict to climate change, from prejudice to*

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1. Majjhima Nikaya, Volume 1.

*growing inequality. We see people turning inwards. And we see a crisis of solidarity.*<sup>(2)</sup>

More significantly, the Secretary-General of the United Nations affirmed the importance of Buddhism to human beings as well as to the purpose that the United Nations is aiming for: “*The Buddha’s teachings can inspire us to become global citizens. And the focus in Buddhism on the inherent dignity of life finds resonance today in our 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.*”<sup>(3)</sup>

The above statement of the Secretary-General of the United Nations has affirmed that Buddhism still proves its value to this life, Buddhist teachings are still essential to people in today’s civilized era, especially their capacity to regulate crises. It should be noted that, as a religion, Buddhist teachings focus not only on liberating the suffering of human life through the path of spiritual experimentation to achieve the ultimate goal of Nirvana, but also on solving the problems of personal, family and social life at each specific time in history. Recognizing the social value of Early Buddhism, Max Weber, one of the most authoritative scholars in sociology, said: “Buddhism was the creation of an urban culture”.<sup>(4)</sup> Max Webber’s statement is closely linked to the context of the pre-Buddhist Indian society in the sixth century B.C. when Indian society had many political, cultural, social, religious, and especially economic changes. This was the turning point of human wisdom with the advent of the Iron Age, the application of new farming techniques in agricultural life<sup>(5)</sup> which changed the perception and living value of ancient India. One more important factor is that the cultural and anthropological interference between the two peoples of Dravidian and Aryan created the process of assimilation and fusion. A new race of people was created, which led to the demands for essential changes in all fields of life.<sup>(6)</sup> In my opinion, the crises and demands for changes in society nowadays are similar to the history of the pre-Buddhist Indian society.

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2. Excerpt from the speech of the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Vesak 2018.

3. *Ibid.*

4. K.T.S. Sarao, *A Text Book of History of Theravada Buddhism*, Jayyed Press, Delhi, 1995.

5. K.T.S. Sarao, *A Text Book of History of Theravada Buddhism*, Jayyed Press, Delhi, 1995.

6. A.L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India*, Rupa & Co., New Delhi, 1994.

Playing the role of the ideal for living, the polytheistic philosophy, particularly Veda philosophy, did not meet the above-mentioned demands. As a religion, Brahmanism also showed its weaknesses in the system of dogma and in its role of leading the spiritual life of India at that time.<sup>(7)</sup> The outbreak of a revolution in the two areas of philosophy and religion was inevitable and could not be different. The result of this revolution was the creation of a philosophical and religious system, called Sramanic thought, advocating a humanistic trend instead of gods, self-responsibility instead of fatalism, and emphasizing asceticism instead of ritualism.<sup>(8)</sup> The Sramanic philosophical system included Ajivaka, Lokayata, Jaina, Ajnana (Agnosticism) and Buddhism. However, after nearly 27 centuries, most of these ideologies have been lost over time; on the contrary, Buddhism still proves its meaning and value in the existence and coexistence with humanity, especially in the context of our modern civilized society today. Why does Buddhism have such intense vitality under the law of impermanence of time? The following statement by Albert Einstein can clarify this issue: “*The religion of the future will be a cosmic religion. It should transcend a personal God and avoid dogmas and theology. Covering both the natural and the spiritual, it should be based on a religious sense arising from the experience of all things, natural and spiritual as a meaningful unity. If there is any religion that would cope with modern scientific needs, it would be Buddhism*”.<sup>(9)</sup>

## 2. THE VITAL CHALLENGES TO BUDDHISM

Despite the above positive statement, that does not mean Buddhism has never faced the challenges to its survival. Some of the following cases may illustrate the ups and downs of Buddhism. After the recession and collapse of the Maurya dynasty at the end of the second century B.C., Sunga's reign began to rule India. Buddhism

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7. The Western world has also experienced similar crises, especially the crisis in the fourth century A.D. when Christianity replaced Greek beliefs and the second crisis with the emergence of some particular religions in the seventeenth century: the belief in the scientific and technical progress and nationalism when Christianity did not satisfied the feelings and knowledge of mankind at that time. (see “Vien Tri, *The Concept of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva*”, Indo Asian Publishing House, 2001)

8. Rhys Davids, *Outline of Buddhism*, Oriental Books Reprint Corp., Delhi.

9. Albert Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions*, Ru & Co, New Delhi, 1995.

had to go through many cruel persecutions during this time.<sup>(10)</sup> King Pusyamitra, a Brahmin, was the fiercest enemy of Buddhism. He devastated temples and stupas, burned many monasteries from Madhyadesa to Jalandhar in Punjab, and killed many bhikkhus with the goal of eliminating Buddhism and propagating Hinduism (the descendant of the Brahmanism).<sup>(11)</sup> Besides, when Brahmanism actually gained back the upper hand and took power on the religious forum, the revival of the practice of polytheistic worship attracted a large number of people including Buddhists. Also, when Buddhist monks were too busy arguing internally about the philosophy, showed a lack of care for aspirations and benefits of lay Buddhists, especially did not update themselves to adapt to the progress of society, Buddhism lost its position and vitality in society.<sup>(12)</sup> Moreover, the ploy to turn Buddha Shakyamuni into the ninth avatar of Vishnu, a Hindu god, in the Indian people's belief became a reality in the ninth century. Therefore, most Indians have regarded Buddha as the avatar of Vishnu since then.<sup>(13)</sup> In other words, Buddhism has been Hinduized, became part of Hinduism, lost its identity, and lost its name for a pretty long time.<sup>(14)</sup> Under the threat to their own survival, Buddhists have had to be flexible and adaptable in their mission of maintaining and developing Buddhism in order to adapt to each historical circumstance.

It should be noted that no matter how adaptable or flexible it is, under any circumstance, the fundamental foundation of philosophy cannot be separated from the Buddha's wisdom which was included in the Tripitaka of Buddhist sacred texts, because "*There is in Buddhism really no innovation, but what seems so is in fact a subtle adaptation of pre-existing ideas*".<sup>(15)</sup> The reason is that the teaching of

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10. Kanai L. Hazra, *The Rise and Decline of Buddhism in India*, Munshiram, M. Publishers, 1995.

11. N. Dutt, *Mahayana Buddhism*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1978.

12. Viên Trí, *Ấn Độ Phật Giáo Sử Luận*, NXB Phương Đông, 2014.

13. See "S. C. Eliot, *Hinduism and Buddhism: A Historical Sketch*", Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., London, 1971.

14. The concrete evidence is in the relics of Buddhism in India where there is always the presence of holy images and statues, and rituals of Hinduism.

15. dward Conze, *Thirty Years of Buddhist Studies*, Bruno Cassirer LTD., Oxford, London, 1967.

the Buddha has never been old or backward along the development path of human knowledge, and never lost its practical values that life always needs. Buddha's teaching is still a light in the middle of the night to help people truly realize who they are, what they want, and how they can achieve true happiness in this life. Determining so is to eliminate some people's idea that modernization of Buddhism is necessary to match the advancements of science, because according to Albert Einstein, our age needs a kind of religion called a cosmic religious feeling and Buddhism contains such stronger element of this.<sup>(16)</sup> Thus, the remaining matter of Buddhists is how to apply skillfully the truth that Buddha discovered for the benefit and happiness of humanity in each specific historical situation.

### 3. THE CONDITIONS TO APPLY THE ADAPTABILITY OF THE BUDDHISM

Everyone will agree that the true value of Buddhism, or of any religion, lies in its doctrine and precepts. However, the true power of this system can only be measured through its organization, namely congregation or the Sangha, consisting of two elements of clergy and lay-people. Therefore, each individual's virtuous life and true inner strength reflect the strength or weakness of a religion. For this reason, the quality of a Buddhists, as messengers of the Tathagata, is one of the factors determining the prosperity or decadence of Buddhism.<sup>(17)</sup> It should be noted that the Buddha's method of spreading the true Dhamma is always on the basis of fitting not only the truth but also the ability of each individual. Thus, a messenger of the Tathagata (clergy and laity) at all historical times needs to meet these two abilities.

First of all, the factor of fitting the truth can only be achieved when a Tathagata messenger comprehends in a thorough and complete way the essence and quintessence of the middle path that the Buddha attained and preached throughout his life of Dhamma propagation. It is included in the doctrine of the Four Noble Truths, Five Aggregates, Dependent Origination, None-self, Karma, Nirvana, etc., and it has been used skillfully by generations

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16. Albert Einstein, *Ideas and Opinion*, Rupa & Co, New Delhi, 2001

17. Viên Trí, *Ý Nghĩa Giới Luật*, NXB Phương Đông, 2016.

of our patriarchs in the mission of maintaining and developing Buddhism from the past until today. In order to truly understand and experience the spirit of practicality and the value of liberation that the middle path has brought, Buddhists must seriously study, experience, and practice the Buddha's teaching in their own daily life. The moral perfection and inner strength of each practitioner will arise in the process of hearing, contemplation, and meditation. This is the material that nurtures the existence and development of each member in the Sangha in particular and of Buddhism in general. On the contrary, if Buddhists are only knowledgeable in terms of philosophy, qualified for academic research, capable of preaching Dhamma, but lack practice and application, that is, understanding not to go along with cultivation or saying not to go along with action, this will be the germ of chaos for Buddhism sooner or later. As a result, the belief of Buddhists and the masses will run out and the Dhamma will wither away when the words of the Tathagata's messengers are contrary to their true lives. The decline stages of Buddhism in the past as well as the present have all been the result of a lifestyle which lacks ideals, morality, and spiritual elements of Buddhists. As the Buddha taught: "...the elder monks live in abundance, they are lax, taking the lead backsliding (to the worldly life), shirking the burden of secluded life, they set going no effort to reach the unattained, to win the goal not won, to realize the unrealized; so the generation that follows comes to depend upon their views... This, monks, is the fourth thing which conduces to the confusion, to the vanishing away of Saddhamma."<sup>(18)</sup> This phenomenon according to the Buddha is the main cause of the destruction of the Buddha Dhamma as Buddha taught that only the worms inside a lion can kill the lion. The historical documents recorded by Xuanzang proved that an unethical lifestyle, enjoyment of sensual pleasures, indulgence, dissipation, sectarianism, socialization, secularization, becoming tools of power, scrambles for wealth, money, and fame had been the major causes leading to the decline of Indian Buddhism for a very long time.<sup>(19)</sup>

In addition, the Buddha is often called the King of Medicine

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18. Anguttara Nikaya, Vol II, Book of the Fours, PTS, 2001, p. 152.

19. S. R. Goyal, *A History of Indian Buddhism*, Kusumanjali Prakashan Meerut, 1993.

because his teachings are likened to different remedies to cure illnesses. There are many different diseases so physicians need to thoroughly understand the causes of each disease in order to be able to cure the disease. Similarly, sentient beings have a myriad of different spiritual abilities, levels, and different psychology. Thus, to make the propagation of the righteous Dhamma effective at each specific time and adaptable to the needs of Buddhist Dhamma learners, a propagator of Dhamma needs to be able to reflect on the learners' feelings and desires in order to choose appropriate teachings to preach. This is the capacity of fitting ability, also known as using skillful means in application of Buddha's teaching that a messenger of Tathagata needs to meet. The reason is that, as in the field of medicine, a medicinal ingredient can be very good, very valuable, very effective, but if used incorrectly, the medicinal herbs can become poisonous. Similarly, the truth, though it is the Buddha's teaching, but is spoken at a wrong place and a wrong time, to wrong people; the truth will also become ridiculous.

In order to attain a real capacity of fitting ability, a Tathagata's messenger must study secular subjects such as philosophy, psychology, education, ethics, politics, social sciences, etc., in order to serve the work of Dhamma propagation. In particular, in the Industry 4.0 era, Buddhists need to be trained and equipped with the necessary knowledge and means of computer science to be flexible and adapt to the advances of human knowledge and human demands in the modern society. Without being flexible and adapting to the changes of this era, Buddhism will lack vitality and will become rigid. Indian Buddhism has experienced such a difficult period and has been forgotten for quite a long time. For this reason N. Dutt, a senior Indian scholar, once stated that "Buddhism was never a social movement".<sup>(20)</sup> This can be seen as a historical lesson that the Buddhist world needs to pay attention to. However, there is another important experience that Buddhists, especially monks, nuns and lay intellectuals in today's society, need to consider carefully. That is, if too much focus is on the aspect of formalism or arbitrary explanation of the Buddha's teaching to satisfy the needs and tastes of believers and the masses (*fitting ability*) with

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20. *Ibid.*

the aim to attain transient achievements, Dhamma propagators will disregard moral and spiritual factors (*fitting the truth*); sooner or later, Buddhism will decline<sup>(21)</sup>. When the factors (monks and nuns and lay intellectuals) play a major role in spreading Buddhism but underestimate their own moral and spiritual experiment, it's sure that they are following the same path of failure of the ancient Indian Buddhism.<sup>(22)</sup> More seriously, the Buddhist teachings will be likely to be mixed and interwoven with non-Buddhist ideas, as they were during the Third Buddhist Council under the Asoka's dynasty through the way of such Dhamma propagation.<sup>(23)</sup>

Obviously, in a world where materialism is rising and pragmatic mind is being valued in daily life, Buddhism really needs a generation of Dhamma propagators who can meet the two demands of both fitting the truth and fitting ability so that Buddhism can be flexible and adapt to a society that is always changing. Also, it should be emphasized that impermanence is always the law for all things in the universe; therefore, the prosperity or decadence of Buddhist organizations is inevitable. However, the wisdom of liberation, that is, the middle path which the Buddha attained and declared more than 2,600 years ago will exist forever, because "the sound core will stand"/"Whatever is of essential worth will remain" (YO SÀRO SO THASSATI).

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21. See "Anguttara Nikaya, Vol II, Book of the Fours", PTS, 2001, p. 151-152.

22. Trần Quang Thuận, *Nguyên Nhân Thăng Trầm Thịnh Suy của Phật Giáo Ấn Độ*, Nxb Hồng Đức, 2013.

23. Viên Trí, *Ấn Độ Phật Giáo Sử Luận*, Nxb Phương Đông, 2014.

