

BUDDHIST CONTRIBUTION TO SUSTAINABLE SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Society is growing in accordance with the law of progress. That development is inevitable because of the growing population and improved material life. However, the development also brings many problems for society such as instability in security, social evils .. . Many solutions have been studied to apply to limit the above problem. Buddhism, which was founded by the Buddha, has also contributed a number of solutions from more than 25 centuries. The article will outline some of the Buddhist solutions that can help society develop sustainably: (i). Buddhist humanistic education through promoting goodness, practicing Buddhist ethics and protecting the environment; (ii). Balancing the material and spiritual life through practicing the Middle Way, and disinterestedness and contentment; (iii). Gender equality in society through respect, without gender discrimination; and (iv). Indispensable relations in society through the doctrine of dependent origination. Thereby, the article also offers suggestions from the above solutions.

A sustainable development society needs to have a synchronous development of the aspects in which people are centered. In other words, people play a decisive role for a society to grow sustainably by

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the people who create society or community and people affect the natural environment directly or indirectly. More than 25 centuries ago, the Buddha identified man as the main factor that created a happy society and taught teachings or methods to help people become perfect. In this short article, I present four basic points, which are considered as practical contributions of Buddhism to the issue of sustainable social development:

1. BUDDHIST HUMANISTIC ETHICAL EDUCATION

Anyone who seeks to learn and practice Buddhism can realize that the Buddha introduced a humanized moral education. In Buddhism, no matter what school you practice and how it is, you will agree to practice the Noble Eightfold Path. In the Noble Eightfold Path, it is possible to divide into three groups including *silà*/virtue, *sàmadhi*/concentration, and *paññā*/wisdom. *Silā* is considered Buddhist ethics. Right speech, right action, right livelihood belongs to *silā* or morality. If a specific analysis is based on the 5 precepts or the 5 rules of training of the Buddhists,¹ then the speech is equivalent to the fourth precept. Right action includes the first, the second, the third and the fifth precept related to the karma of the body. Of course, the karma of the mind is not mentioned but it is the driving force behind it. If based on the 10 good deeds,² right action includes the karma of body, the karma of the mouth and the karma of the mind, divided into the 10 deeds. Practicing the 5 precepts or the 10 good deeds is a solid moral foundation that contributes to making society stable. In addition, right livelihood lists some careers that must be given up or at least should be restricted for the sustainable development of society, including arms trade, human trafficking, meat trade, alcohol trade, and poison trade.³

The above-mentioned careers need to be understood and applied flexibly to bring positive results to the society. Human trafficking needs to be banned because people cannot be considered as goods. Arms trade should be controlled because it is difficult to strictly ban it. Meat trade or animal slaughtering, alcohol trade and

1. Anguttara Nikaya. Gihi Sutta. the Householder. No 5. 179.

2. Majjhima Nikaya, Saleyyaka sutta, no. 41.

3. Anguttara Nikaya. Vanijja Sutta. Business. No. 5. 177.

poison trade need to be managed and implemented appropriately. Because these trades cannot be completely banned, people should control them effectively to make society more stable. For example, we cannot prohibit meat trade because people also need to eat meat. Therefore, what needs to be done is how to manage animal slaughter for hygienic. Alcohol trade or poison trade should be clearly managed such as the specified places, limited time and adults only. This issue has been well done by a number of the developed countries.

Practicing the five precepts and the ten good deeds means that each of us contributes to build a stable and peaceful community or society. Since then, Buddhist morality has expanded by practicing the protection of the surrounding environment through not killing indiscriminately, not destroying the environment as it relates to right livelihood and right action. The problem is how to motivate many people to practice. If the state uses laws and penalties; religions use the teachings such as God's punishment, and so on, Buddhism emphasizes the law of cause and effect. The doctrine of cause and effect helps people to be afraid of bad fruits, and to know the blessings of practicing Buddhist ethics. Therefore, if the Buddhist ethics is widely applied, the results for sustainable social development are very positive and reliable. The above issues are decided by human beings not by any other supernatural being.

2. PRACTICING THE MIDDLE WAY

An important historical event in the life of the Buddha before his enlightenment is to give up austerity or self-affliction and return to a balanced life. That way of life, which is later taught by the Buddha, is known as the Middle Way. In *the Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma (the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta)* - the first Sutta taught by the Buddha after his enlightenment, the Buddha presented the Middle Way discovered by him. The Buddha taught:

There are these two extremes that are not to be indulged in by one who has gone forth. Which two? That which is devoted to sensual pleasure with reference to sensual objects: base, vulgar, common, ignoble, unprofitable; and that which is devoted to self-

affliction: painful, ignoble, unprofitable. Avoiding both of these extremes, the Middle Way realized by the Tathagata leads to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to unbinding.⁴

Generally speaking, an ordained person or a person in general needs to avoid self-indulgence and self-mortification because both lead to suffering and unsustainable social development. An example of Sona who was skilled at playing the vina (a kind of music instrument) is used to illustrate a balanced way of life. Answering the Buddha's questions, he agrees that when the strings of his vina is neither too taut nor too loose, but tuned to be right on pitch, his vina is in tune and playable.⁵ In the same way, the Middle Way leads to long-term happiness and the four stages of enlightenment in Buddhism. The Middle Way is also the Noble Eightfold Path.

The Buddha said that to addict to indulgence of sense-pleasures and to addict to self-mortification could not bring about positive results. For monks or religious practitioners, they cannot get enlightenment or achieve religious purposes if they fall into these two extremes. For secular life, indulgence of sense-pleasures will lead to boredom and suffering when lacking them. When spiritual life is less concerned with practice, people's ability of controlling the mind or people's endurance of the adversity becomes weak. Therefore, they often have unwise behavior that may cause suffering for themselves and other people. Moreover, excessive material satisfaction makes people do more, consume more and exploit the environment much more. As a result, people get anxious, stressed and depressed; the environment that is devastated by over-exploitation causes climate change. The paradox is that some rich countries or a group of the rich enjoy a lot of sense pleasures causing environmental pollution while many poor countries and many poor people must suffer the same consequences. Climate change and changing environment, which can cause natural disasters, impacts all of us.

The doctrine of the Middle Way really benefits all of us and contributes to sustainable social development. The monk needs to practice the Middle Way to live happily and get enlightenment. The

4. Samyutta Nikaya. Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta. 56.11

5. Anguttara nikaya, Sona Sutta. No. 6.55.

layman who practices this doctrine will be less consumed. His mind will be less stressful, depressed due to meditation to balance the mind and body. Meditation helps many people in western society deal with depression, stress, mental confusion, sadness, and so on through transforming their emotions or feelings.⁶ When people are able to control their emotions, actions that cause suffering, instability, crimes and so on are reduced and thus society lessens social evils. That is probably the goal of all countries in the world.

In consumption, according to the Middle Way doctrine, we need to practice 'disinterestedness and contentment.' Cultivating 'disinterestedness and contentment' can bring happiness right now. It is said that: 'If his mind is satisfied, he will be happy even though he lies on the ground, but if his mind is not satisfied, he will feel unhappy and miserable even if he lives in heaven.' When people know how to be satisfied with the results due to their efforts and know how to consume appropriately, life is happy. Obese population and excessive consumption will decrease. The surplus can be shared to the poor. When people know how to share and support each other, the society will reduce the gap between the rich and the poor. This is one of conditions that develop stably the society. Moreover, when consumption is reduced, people decrease to devastate nature and have free time to practice living mindfully. Mindfulness is an effective practice that can help everyone control his or her life and live peacefully and happily right now. That happiness is not brought about by indulgence of sense pleasures, but it is generated from inner mind.

3. EQUAL RIGHTS FOR MEN AND WOMEN

Human rights are very important to stabilize society. Depending on a society, the rights or equality between men and women are specified. Today, male and female rights are considered equal, but in order to achieve that result people have to struggle for quite a long time.⁷ On equal rights for men and women, the Buddha mentioned

6. Hồng Quang. (2014). *Meditation and Healthy Living*. A Buddhist Approach to Healthy Living. Ho Chi Minh City: Buddhism Today Publications, pp. 239-263.

7. Bonnie Eisenberg and Mary Ruthsdotter. (1998). *History of the Women's Rights Movement*. The National Women's History Alliance. (online). Available at: <https://nationalwom->

more than two millennia ago. The Buddha talks about the role of the woman on the occasion of the birthday of King Pasenadi's daughter: "A woman child who may grow wise and virtuous is admired. A woman gives birth to a son who may become a king or a national hero. That woman deserves to be the master of the people."⁸ In particular, the Buddha allowed women to be ordained as nuns or Bhikkhunis in Buddhism. This event had never happened before and even at the present time for some religions. The Buddha also affirmed the ability of the woman who could practice the Dharma to attain Arahantship. The women's enlightenment has been recorded in the Therigatha (Verses of the Elder Nuns)⁹, which proved the statement of the Buddha.

In today's society, women contribute greatly to social development. Women can be presidents, prime ministers, CEOs of corporations, professors of universities ... and they succeed in their assigned roles. Because of gender equality,¹⁰ they have the opportunity to be voted or chosen for the positions mentioned above. Thus, the equal opportunity to compete between men and women create a driving force for the sustainable development of the society. Historically, injustice has led to the struggle to overthrow the government and fight for justice. It has really caused instabilities in society. Therefore, the recognition of gender equality is a social progress and Buddhism has been going for more than 2,000 years.

In Buddhism, the ordained women have contributed to the development of Buddhism. In Mahayana Buddhism countries and a few Theravada Buddhism countries, the nun contributes a great deal to guide the faithful in practicing the Dharma as in Plum Village, to mobilize people for the construction of a temple where Buddhists can study and practice the Dharma, to teach children at kindergartens, and to do charity work like the case of Bhikkhuni

enhistoryalliance.org/resources/womens-rights-movement/history-of-the-womens-rights-movement/ [Accessed 20 February, 2019].

8. Samyatta Nikaya, volume 1, Sagatha Vagga, I. 86. The Daughter.

9. Anguttara Nikaya, Khuddhaka Nikaya, Therigatha.

10. This is also one of the eight aims of the Millennium Development Goals outlined by the UN.

Cheng Yen in Taiwan.¹¹ Of course, the precepts, which were set out to protect women, are necessary and they need to comply.

4. THE INTER-RELATIONSHIP OF PEOPLE IN SOCIETY

Social formation and development are conceived according to different theories that lead to different lifestyles. There is a theory that recognizes the intervention or decision of God and a great number of people implicitly accept this view. Buddhism teaches that all of us are correlated according to the principle of dependent origination. Therefore, there is nothing that can be separated but co-existed. Therefore, everyone must be responsible for building a sustainable development society and having the right to inherit results.

In western countries, the government has built a strict legal system to protect citizens' rights. All citizens must pay taxes as mandatory obligations depending on their income. In contrast, all citizens have the right to enjoy social security policies in accordance with the law. The law is clear and the people comply with the law strictly. Therefore, the people are conscious of protecting their country. The citizens of a country are not very poor, the situation of crime is reduced and society is stable.¹² In particular, if people are influenced by morality and satisfied with their living conditions, they can be peaceful and happy like the Bhutan people. In contrast, people suffer from common misfortune in the countries where there are injustice, corrupt leaders, taxpayers without enjoying social services, and so forth... Since then, society is unstable because of social evils, moral degradation and so on.

The doctrine of dependent origination is a miraculous discovery of the Buddha. Through the doctrine, the Buddha proved convincingly about the inter-existence of all phenomena (inter-being) including the relationship of individuals in society. The Udana (Khuddhaka Nikaya, chapter Bodhi) writes: "When this is, that is. From the arising of this comes the arising of that." According

11. Tzu Chi Foundation. (2014) *Biography of Dharma Master Cheng Yen*. Tzu Chi. (online). Available at: http://tw.tzuchi.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=159&Itemid=198&lang=en. [Accessed 22 February 2019].

12. This is also one of the eight aims of the Millennium Development Goals outlined by the UN.

to this doctrine, sustainable social development needs to develop synchronously between material and moral life. Material wealth making a civilized society must go hand in hand with protecting the natural and human environment. Wealth is based on exploiting others, a corruption, an environmental destruction, an excessive exploitation of resources; society is difficult to be stabilized for a long time. However, if people's morality and responsibility are promoted, people will cultivate their compassion and loving kindness in order to think about their fellow human beings, to think about the common in which they themselves are involved.

To apply the doctrine of dependent origination to the practical life is a great challenge. With a developed education, people can understand the relationship of individuals and between individuals and the environment. However, crimes and destruction still exist due to greed and selfishness. Therefore, people need to be educated on the one hand and their living conditions need to be improved on the one hand. The harmonious development of material and morality is an effective solution to contribute to the stable development of society.

5. CONCLUSION

Buddhism has practical solutions for sustainable social development. For more than two millennia, the Buddha's teachings are still valid. The Buddhist humanistic education, the Middle Way, gender equality and the doctrine of dependent origination can contribute to sustainable development of society. The government of countries and the leaders of social organizations may study and apply these teachings of Buddhism to society or the community. I hope that scholars will provide a program that guides people to apply these teachings to their life.

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