

VIET NAM ACCOMPANYING GLOBAL BUDDHIST COMMUNITY IN STRIVING FOR A WORLD OF PEACE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT¹

by H.E. Vu Khoan²

Your Holiness, Most Venerables, Venerables and Members of the Sangha

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am greatly honoured to attend this major global cultural event, the United Nations Day of Vesak (UNDV) 2019 and doubly honoured to address this noble Forum held under the theme of “Buddhist Approach to Global Leadership and Shared Responsibilities for Sustainable Societies”.

Vietnam takes pride in hosting the UNDV celebration for the third time, a momentous event not only for the Buddhist community but also for the whole world. This reflects the trust that the United Nations as well as the global Buddhist community has placed in our people and the Vietnamese Sangha, and their untiring contribution to humanity’s common endeavour for lasting peace, people’s well-being, and the equal cooperation among nations for a sustainable society.

UNDV 2019 is celebrated against the background of multiple changes that Professor S.R. Bhatt from India observed: “We are passing through a critical period, struggling between best

1. Translated from Vietnamese by Dr. Tran Tien Khanh.

2. Former Deputy Prime Minister of Viet Nam.

possibilities and worst possibilities.” Echoing his views, I would like to characterize the present situation as “the struggle between benevolence and evil, and good and bad”.

It is an irony that while scientific - technological and economic development reaches unprecedented peaks and people’s material life is becoming increasingly adequate, people’s hearts are not peaceful and signs of ignorance (S. *avidyā*, P. *avijjā*, C. 無明) are more and more numerous. Many moral values are degrading and social evils are on a steady rise; more and more traditional and non-traditional threats loom large such as ethnic and religious conflicts, armed conflicts, frequent bloody terrorist attacks; humanitarian disasters break out; the ecological environment is being seriously destroyed and epidemic diseases stalk the world etc.

So what led to these ominous situations? Could what is happening be boiled down to causality between development and the need for sustainability? Economic development at all costs, regardless of social justice and ecological environment, has deepened the gap between the rich and the poor in and among nations; social discontent worsens day by day; greed, anger, and ignorance (the three poisons) raise their heads; and the spiritual life towards the good is challenged. In addition, power politics such as imposition, intervention and sanctions etc., have driven many ethnic groups into destructive conflicts and consequently, millions and millions of people have to leave their homelands and look to migrate to foreign countries; this situation leads to racial, group and religious hostility.

Of course, today’s world does not contain only dark spots. In sharp contrast we have the ardent aspirations of nations for a peaceful world, prosperous life, happiness and equal cooperation and hope for a brighter future.

How will that future become a reality? That is probably what each and every one of us is concerned about. In our reflection, such a future will not come on its own but requires the one-mindedness and joint efforts of everyone, every nation, every religion, especially the Buddhist community. With over one billion followers on all the five continents, the Buddhist community plays a very important

role in shaping the future. Certainly, our Scientific Conference with the participation of many renowned scientists and intellectuals from the highly regarded Sangha will thrash out many profound ideas and practical measures to contribute to the common efforts of the international community to make our world more peaceful and more sustainable. As an individual, I am unable to offer any big solutions myself, however, I do have three wishes:

First, in the final analysis, whether the world is peaceful or not and the development of the humanity sustainable or not, largely depends on the people, from ordinary people to those in power. Buddhism teachings contain so many good or right things, contributing to nurturing good and repelling evil. With those advantages, the Buddhist community can play a leadership role, and make effective contribution to sustainable development and building a peaceful world by spreading the good and right things in Buddhism teachings, that encourages good and discourages evil in each human regardless of social status, class and ethnicity.

Also with its own advantages, the Buddhist community can find ways to resolve problems or at least to ease conflicts and hostility among peoples, religions and classes. In this regard, I believe the idea of Professor Emeritus Peter van den Berg from Tilburg University (the Netherlands) on “leading with wisdom” deserves great respect.

Second, all religions converge towards fostering good and repelling evil though they adopt different doctrines and teachings. If religions all over the world agree to work together for that noble goal, they can create a tremendous multiplier effect. It would be a great blessing for humankind, if one day, a global religious summit is held under the auspices of the United Nations with the participation of all religious leaders with the aim to look for directions and solutions to create a peaceful world and happy life for all.

Third, whether the ideas and practical solutions developed at UNDV 2019 will come to life, very much depends on the response of governments, as well as international organizations. Hopefully, the recommendations of VESAK 2019 will be integrated into specific policies adopted by Governments as well as the United Nations and other international organizations, creating a synergy

of change for a more sustainable and peaceful world.

On the path of national renewal over the past 30 years, our Vietnamese government has always emphasized the need for sustainable development that is closely associated with social development, poverty reduction and nature protection within the spirit of economic development. In that framework, the building of culture and our people towards truthfulness, goodness and betterment forms a solid spiritual foundation of the society, with an endogenous capacity to achieve the goal of “wealthy people and a strong, democratic, fair and civilized nation”.

With those ideas in mind, our country has proactively worked towards the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (2001 - 2015) as well as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Our efforts have won appreciation of the United Nations. Thanks to them, in 2010, Vietnam ranked among the middle-income countries, the country’s poverty reduction recorded impressive achievements with a poverty rate of only about 3% of the population compared to over 50% in the mid-80s, when the renovation launched. Such socio-economic achievements are credited to the efforts of all sections of the population, including followers of various religions, especially Buddhist disciples.

However, our country still faces many challenges and its economic development is still limited. In a world changing daily under the impact of miraculous achievements in science and technology, we need to continue making great strides, so as not to be left behind. Many social issues, including the growing rich-poor gap are becoming acute. Morality and lifestyle are degrading in some parts. Additionally, Viet Nam is one of the countries that is feeling the most serious impact from global climate change.

This current situation calls for extraordinary efforts for sustainable development, in which people should be both the center and the main driver of the development for physically healthy people with sound mind and soul, creative talent, high social responsibility, good character and high morality. In my opinion, this will be decisive in bringing Viet Nam on par with our friends the world over.

In such a way, our aspirations fully coincide with the objectives of UNDV 2019; the ideas of UNDV, including today's Scientific Conference. I am convinced that our conference today will come up with many useful ideas and recommendations for our sustainable national development.

As a final note, I would like to thank you for travelling long distances to our country and sharing with us many good and right things.

I wish all of you peace and happiness.

