

# BUDDHIST APPROACH TO GLOBAL LEADERSHIP AND SHARED RESPONSIBILITIES FOR SUSTAINABLE SOCIETIES

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‘Global Leadership’ and ‘Sustainable Societies’ are two inspiring but difficult notions that require a wide analysis of the challenges the modern world faces, as well as a deep theoretical understanding of who we, human beings are, how we function as individuals as well as a collective, and if we have an inherent nature that either allows or, to the contrary, destroys the possibility of social change at a global scale that our world seems to require today. One element of that deeper understanding is to address the ideological, psychological, spiritual and/or religious character of the human nature, and to see if that is part of the problem itself, or if it can be utilised or transformed as a way out of the challenges that the various socio-economic factors of human behaviour pose in the form of a major crisis today. It may turn out that the crisis we face is not the one we think about, but a totally different one, and is closer to the notion of *avijja* (ignorance) the Buddha talked about.

Pope Francis’ *Laudato Si’* encyclical discusses the main set of issues from a Catholic theological perspective. My goal is to investigate if and how Buddhism could give any answers to these issues. That requires a threefold approach: a) to properly understand the current challenges of the modern world, b) to understand what the Buddha thought and taught in this context and c) to see how contemporary Buddhism relates to these challenges while

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discussing if and how Buddhist leaders can offer a solution and/or if Buddhism itself also requires any transformation.

My goal, as one of the main outcomes of this investigation, is to provide some practical suggestions how Buddhism could go forward with its approach and develop its ‘mindful leadership’ practice that can also inspire global leadership in general. The conclusion, however, may be something completely unexpected.

## I. CURRENT CHALLENGES OF THE MODERN WORLD

We all know the 17 SDGs or Sustainable Development Goals of the UN from our heart, they are discussed widely in this important gathering. They all address a particular challenge or issue we face in our modern life: poverty, hunger, illnesses, illiteracy, gender inequality, racial discrimination, water scarcity and polluted water, overconsumption of energy and materials, polluting transportation, exploitation of work, contamination of water, air and soil, lack of knowledge and indifference, incompetency of leaders, lack of global partnership to solve issues at large scale, etc.

According to PwC, one of the leading auditing companies, there are 5 major megatrends or global shifts that are shaping our world today (<https://www.pwc.co.uk/issues/megatrends.html>):

- Demographic shifts (towards emerging economies)
- Shifts in economic power (towards emerging economies)
- Accelerated urbanization (especially in medium-sized cities of developing countries)
- Climate change and resource scarcity (increased population, urbanization and prosperity increase the demand for energy, food and water supplies)
- Technological breakthroughs (digital revolution without boundaries and borders)

These megatrends imply the notion of infinite growth, often criticised by people looking for an alternative paradigm of sustainable development or simply that of no-growth. Based on his teacher, Leopold Kohr’s concept, E.F. Schumacher argued in his famous book, *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics As If*

*People Mattered*, that “it does not require more than a simple act of insight to realise that infinite growth of material consumption in a finite world is an impossibility” (Schumacher, 1973, p. 88) and that “I have no doubt that it is possible to give a new direction to technological development, a direction that shall lead it back to the real needs of man, and that also means: to the actual size of man. Man is small, and, therefore, small is beautiful. To go for gigantism is to go for self-destruction” (Schumacher, 1973, p. 117).

## II. ECOLOGICAL SPIRITUALITY

As former Director of the Spirit of Humanity Forum in Iceland, I had belonged to that group of people who thought that the world is going through a major crisis in the current Human Epoch or Anthropocene considered to be the latest geological period of Earth: major global climate change, environmental crisis and degradation, the 6<sup>th</sup> mass extinction, etc., mainly caused by disruptive human activities on the planet. Participants of that Forum and many other similar gatherings worldwide conclude that unless a massive shift happens in global human attitudes toward nature and life in general, including our everyday lifestyle and economic activities, the global events soon take a form of an irreversible chain of catastrophes. The primary change should happen in our mindset that many of its proponents call a spiritual transformation from within: less consumption, the economy of enough, the lifestyle of contentment, etc.

Pope Francis’ *Laudato Si’ Encyclical Letter On Care For Our Common Home*, issued in 2015, identified all these issues and possible solutions in a detailed and moving call for an ‘integral ecology’, i.e. an ecological spirituality that combines all environmental, economic, social and cultural aspects of our life on this planet (Pope Francis, 2015, pp. 103–120). The Holy Father also offers practical lines of approach and action to tackle the crisis, i.e. dialogue: dialogue on the environment in the international community, dialogue for new national and local policies, dialogue and transparency in decision-making at all levels, dialogues between politics and economy how to understand human fulfillment, and dialogue between religions and sciences how to embark on a path of finding solutions hand-in-hand (Pope Francis, 2015, pp. 121–148).

Many Buddhists follow this call all over the world, a great example of which is this UNDV conference on “Buddhist Approach to Global Leadership and Shared Responsibilities for Sustainable Societies”. The ideal of a new way of life on this planet that is more loving and compassionate, that is applied in all aspects of our activities and decision-making, from the top to the bottom, is inherent in Buddhist spirituality. The notions of *ahimsa* (non-harming), *metta* (loving kindness), *karuna* (compassion), *anatta* (non-self), etc., all lead to the idea of a new way of being and acting, and that such change can only start from within, from an enlightening moment of understanding the interdependent nature of reality (*paticca-samuppada*) and that we live in a coherent web of causes and effects: our actions do have their consequences and we cannot avoid them (*karma*). The Buddha identified the root cause of our actions leading to a life and world permeated by suffering (*dukkha*) with three inherent aspects of the human psyche: *avijja* (ignorance), *tanha* (thirst) and *upadana* (attachment). One of the main realisations of the Buddha was that the key underlying factor behind the suffering nature of existence (*bhava dukkha*) is psychological. Changing our psychological character would change the outcomes of our actions, thoughts and words, and the root causes of our suffering would cease to exist. While that may be true to the individual, the question arises whether we can repeat that collectively?

This doctrine of the need for and possibility of ‘inner change’ is the main common ground that connects all spiritual approaches to offering a solution to the current crisis. We may call it the ‘Inner Change’ doctrine. This doctrine is applied to all aspects of our societies: inner change of parents will nurture happier children, inner change of teachers will lead to a more inclusive education system, inner change of nurses and doctors will provide us with a better health-care, and inner change of leaders will lead to better decision-making and more harmonious societies. Systemic change is achieved through personal change at all levels if the latter miraculously coalesces in massive numbers of individuals, thereby reaching a tipping point of large-scale societal change. Others believe that even a smaller-scale change can lead to global consequences in the form of a ‘Butterfly Effect’.

### III. POPULAR MAINSTREAM VARIATIONS OF THE ‘INNER CHANGE’ DOCTRINE

Yuval Noah Harari, one of the most popular contemporary public intellectuals, the author of best-selling books *Sapiens* (Harari, 2014) and *Homo Deus* (Harari, 2016), in his most recent book, *21 Lessons for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Harari, 2018), identifies the major challenges of our current age that are reshaping what we think we, human beings are. These are:

a) technological challenges affecting our belief in liberal democracy, the dignity of work, liberty and equality (Harari, 2018, pp. 1–81),

b) political challenges disrupting communities and human civilisation as a whole in the form of nationalist and religious dogmas, and raising issues around immigration (Harari, 2018, pp. 83–155),

c) psychological challenges in the form of living in despair or hope, affected by issues such as terrorism, wars, human self-centredness, religious exclusivism or secularism (Harari, 2018, pp. 157–214), and

d) challenges with what truth is: our ignorance, what justice is, the phenomena of post-truth and fake news, and disillusioned views on the future (Harari, 2018, pp. 215–255).

Finally, e) he analyses the importance of resilience amidst all of that: constantly changing education adapted to the actual needs, the meaning of life and the practice of meditation and observation as a final sane stance in this chaotic and rapidly changing world (Harari, 2018, 257-319).

In the concluding remarks of his book he writes: “we had better understand our minds before the algorithms make our minds up for us” (Harari, 2018, p. 318).

Harari’s books (Harari, 2014, 2016, 2018) are revolutionary in the sense that they don’t depict an ideal, spiritualistic view of the human nature that we would only need to find inside. He fully understands and takes in the most recent scientific findings on the human psyche and its biases. He is truly Buddhist in the sense

that he acknowledges the existing boundaries and limitations of our understanding, their underlying factors in the human psyche, but still offers a naturalistic (non-religious) view of the inherent capabilities of the human mind to calm down, observe and find meaning from within. He offers a solution for all the problems identified in the first four parts of his book: to find a global identity of the human race that can then face the major challenges as united as it can be:

“This may sound overambitious, but *Homo Sapiens* cannot wait. Philosophy, religion and science are all running out of time. People have debated the meaning of life for thousands of years. We cannot continue this debate indefinitely. The looming ecological crisis, the growing threat of weapons of mass destruction, and the rise of new disruptive technologies will not allow it. Perhaps most importantly, artificial intelligence and biotechnology are giving humanity the power to reshape and re-engineer life. Very soon somebody will have to decide how to use this power – based on some implicit or explicit story about the meaning of life. Philosophers are very patient people, but engineers are far less patient, and investors are the least patient of all. If you don’t know what to do with the power to engineer life, market forces will not wait a thousand years for you to come up with an answer. The invisible hand of the market will force upon you its own blind reply. Unless you are happy to entrust the future of life to the mercy of quarterly revenue reports, you need a clear idea what life is all about” (Harari, 2018, pp xiii–xiv).

#### IV. CHALLENGING THE ‘DOOMSDAY SCENARIOS’

More recently, another two best-selling authors have shaken the firm building of these ‘Doomsday Scenarios’ and the narrative of the ‘Inner Change’ doctrine as I called it above.

One of them is cognitive scientist Steven Pinker who in 2018 wrote a new book, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (Pinker, 2018). He argues that the depressing interpretation of world events is based on our human



psychological biases, such as the so-called ‘negativity bias’. “[T]he gory headlines and prophecies of doom ... play to our psychological biases” – we can read on the back cover (Pinker, 2018). If we think that the world is falling apart or soon coming to an end, we need to think again: “people are living longer, healthier, freer, and happier lives, and while our problems are formidable, the solutions lie in the Enlightenment ideal of using reason and science” (Pinker, 2018, back cover). Pinker suggests to follow the data: he presents many graphs showing that “life, health, prosperity, safety, peace, knowledge, and happiness are on the rise, not just in the West, but worldwide.” This progress is “a gift of the Enlightenment: the conviction that reason and science can enhance human flourishing.” Pinker argues, however, that the Enlightenment project, as he calls it, is under attack today, it “needs a vigorous defense”. It “swims against currents of human nature – tribalism, authoritarianism, demonization, magical thinking – which demagogues are all too willing to exploit. Many commentators, committed to political, religious, or romantic ideologies, fight a rearguard action against it. The result is a corrosive fatalism and a willingness to wreck the precious institutions of liberal democracy and global cooperation” (Pinker, 2018, back cover).

Another best-selling author, Hans Rosling, together with Ola Rosling and Anna Rösling Rönnlund, published a book around the same time, in early 2018, with the title *Factfulness: Ten Reasons We’re Wrong About the World – and Why Things Are Better Than You Think*. They prove in the book that “[w]hen asked simple questions about global trends – what percentage of the world’s population live in poverty; why the world’s population is increasing; how many girls finish school – we systematically get the answers wrong. So wrong that a chimpanzee choosing answers at random will consistently outguess teachers, journalists, Nobel laureates, and investment bankers” (Rosling, 2018, back cover).

Why does it happen? – one may ask. The author’s answer:

“Think about the world. War, violence, natural disasters, man-made disasters, corruption. Things are bad, and it feels they are getting worse, right? The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer; and the number

of poor just keeps increasing; and we will soon run out of resources unless we do something drastic. At least that's the picture that most Westerners see in the media and carry around in their heads. I call it the overdramatic worldview. It's stressful and misleading. In fact, the vast majority of the world's population lives somewhere in the idle of the income scale. ... they are not living in extreme poverty. ... Step-by-step, year-by-year, the world is improving. ... Though the world faces huge challenges, we have made tremendous progress. This is the fact-based worldview. It is the overdramatic worldview that draws people to the most dramatic and negative answers ... if your worldview is wrong, then you will make systematically wrong guesses. But this overdramatic worldview is not caused simply by out-of-date knowledge ... it is not the fault of an evil-minded media, propaganda, fake news, or wrong facts. ... the overdramatic worldview is so difficult to shift, because it comes from the very way our brains work. ... Our brains often jump to swift conclusions without much thinking... We are interested in gossip and dramatic stories... We crave for sugar and fat... We have many instincts that used to be useful thousands of years ago. ... we need to learn to control our drama intake. Uncontrolled, our appetite for the dramatic goes too far, prevents us from seeing the world as it is..." (Rosling, 2018, p. 13–15).

Rosling's purpose with his book is "to fight devastating global ignorance. ... to change people's way of thinking, calm their irrational fears, and redirect their energies into constructive activities. ... it is data as therapy. It is understanding as a source of mental peace. Because the world is not as dramatic as it seems" (Rosling, 2018, pp. 15–16). In the end, "[i]t turns out that the world, for all its imperfections, is in a much better state than we might think. ... when we worry about everything all the time instead of embracing a worldview based on facts, we can lose our ability to focus on the things that threaten us most" (Rosling, 2018, back cover).

In his work, Rosling identifies ten instincts that distort our perspective, instincts he calls *gap*, *negativity*, *straight line*, *fear*, *size*,



*generalisation, destiny, single perspective, blame and urgency.* Some of it is associated with our tendency to divide the world into two camps (us and them), the way we consume media (dominated by fear) or how we look at progress (“things are getting worse”). In his laudation of the book, Former U.S. President Barack Obama writes: “Factfulness ... is a hopeful book about the potential for human progress when we work off facts rather than our inherent biases.”

What is interesting in these latest arguments made by public intellectuals is that they offer data-driven analysis of trends, the methodology of so-called ‘factfulness’ as an antidote to the sentiments of depression and inertness felt by many people all over the world in their hearts while still continuing living with the same old habits. There is a big debate why people, when confronted with immediate doomsday scenarios of global climate change, mainly driven by their own ‘negativity bias’, are not able to change their course of action and work on a collective solution. Probably, because while feeling depressed, they know deeper in their heart that somehow everything is fine, things are not as bad as they look like.

## V. THE ‘WAR OF PSYCHOLOGICAL BIASES’

Many psychologists and behavioural economists started developing a complex framework of additional ‘biases’ to explain the so-called massive, global inaction in environmental matters. It seems there is a ‘war of psychological biases’ waged upon who understands our inherent biased nature better. There are those who think that our ‘psychological biases’ constitute the main reasons why we don’t change our behaviour towards nature:

“... the five common psychological biases [i.e. positive illusions, cognitive dissonance, fundamental attribution error, prospect theory and in-group/out-group bias]... bode ill for environmental protection. All of them lead people to downplay the probability and danger of environmental change, and their role in it, while increasing their perceived incentives to maintain the status quo, and to blame problems on others. ... Numerous features of human nature and the nature of institutions that humans create, limit our ability to detect and react

appropriately to novel threats. Because these features stem from independent sources at different levels of analysis (e.g. individual behaviour, organizational behaviour, elite decision-making, etc.), they are likely to generate a status quo bias across a wide range of circumstances. For example, even a forward-looking bureaucracy may run up against a reluctant public or a short-sighted political leadership. To put it bluntly, society seems predisposed to preserve the status quo until something goes wrong. ... We suggest that sensory, psychological, organizational and political biases are a powerful influence on people's preferences, perceptions and reactions to environmental change. The good news is that because these biases are systematic, not random, with known sources of variation, it will be possible to identify their causes and consequences and design political, economic and social policies that channel people's biases away from disaster. ... What are the prospects for the future? An awareness of psychological biases is likely to become increasingly important. There is a growing mismatch between our psychology – a psychology that evolved to deal with small groups of human beings in a very different social and physical environment – and the increasingly technological and globalized world we inhabit. As human interactions are increasingly replaced by human–computer interfaces for shopping, working and entertainment, we are gradually preventing natural sensory feedback to the brain. This means that the causes and consequences of our decisions and actions often fail to trigger the appropriate human responses. Simply put, we see less and less of the results of our actions, even as they have a larger and larger impact on the globe. ... History suggests that without experiencing direct negative consequences of our actions (and sometimes even with such experience), human societies often wait for disasters to occur before adapting to novel threats, whether they are disasters of national security, disease, starvation, poverty or environmental change” (Johnson, D. and Levin. S., 2009, p. 1598–1601).

We, Buddhists, also think that there is some inherent flaw in the human nature, something we call *avijja* (ignorance).

There are those, such as Pinker and Rosling, who consider our 'negativity bias' or 'ten instincts' as the major reason for the so-called overdramatic worldview, and would like to offer a therapy of facts to cure our pessimism and depression.

What if the real reason for the 'lack of action' is that we instinctively know what the real truth is: that we live better day by day, and it's good enough? What if it's not the 'boiling frog' fable that shapes our current reality (i.e. we are like frogs being slowly boiled alive not noticing what's happening), nor even the 'ostrich burying its head in the sand' metaphor that describes how we, human beings act collectively when we face the massive challenges of our world today? What if we simply live a life in front of a TV, horrified by all negative news that we crave for simply because we enjoy hearing dreadful stories while also enjoy living a good life?

The notion of 'factfulness' was clearly introduced with the intention to replace another trendy notion offered as an antidote to our more and more depressed state of mind, i.e. 'mindfulness'. 'Mindfulness' as an international movement clearly belongs to the 'Inner Change' doctrine described above. My paper is not about highlighting or arguing for the benefits of mindfulness, there are thousands of articles doing that nowadays. I would simply like to offer a tentative question: is mindfulness really the antidote we need? Doesn't it (and other similar trends of introspection) create a new form of pressure on those who practice it? I call it the 'transformation pressure'. I meet more and more people telling me they know they need to transform themselves, they need to change their habits of eating, working, sleeping, loving, everything, but they can't. They are not good enough, they start blaming themselves, initiating a never-ending circle of remorse that they are not doing well enough what they are supposed to do. Isn't that a new form of pressure, in many cases leading to mental breakdown and more depression?

And now Buddhism is under pressure, too, to roll up its sleeves and compete with the secular mindfulness movement for the souls

of sentient beings who are suffering. Mindfulness may cover the idea of Samadhi within Buddhism, but where are Sila and Panna left? Isn't Panna an invitation to develop right understanding of how things function? Isn't it about 'facts', rather than being driven by emotions? And isn't Sila about knowing how to act rightfully? The basic fact of reality is suffering, not stress. We are stressed, because we feel we don't do the things we are supposed to or ought to. Is Buddhism about reducing stress? Or is it about understanding and practicing the Noble Eightfold Path as a way to liberation, as a way to *eliminating the causes* of suffering, not suffering itself? And that is eliminating *avijja* (ignorance), *tanha* (thirst) and *upadana* (attachment). That requires Panna and Sila as well.

When we talk about 'mindful leadership' in this conference, I also highlight the need for 'wise and righteous' leadership as well. Meaning, sometimes, 'factful leadership' as such. We can't always take for granted all the doomsday scenarios, we need to investigate them thoroughly as well.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Unless we understand the very nature of who we are, from both a first-person experiential (phenomenological) and third-person descriptive perspective (data-driven analysis based on theoretical and empirical science), we tend to fall into the trap of our so-called 'psychological biases', whatever they are.

Is it possible to achieve a non-biased perspective? The Buddha's teachings might provide us with such an approach. When asked about questions such as the creation of the universe or the end of life, he dismissed them as 'metaphysical', meaning, we don't know the answers, we can only speculate about them, but what matters in the end is how we experience our life here and now and what we do with it. It may lead to a very narrow perspective on what we can understand and know, but this very minimal programme of understanding is the one that leads to liberation from the causes of suffering in the end. We may feel quite depressed watching the unfolding environmental and ecological apocalypse, or any other scenario that may lead to a major eruption of the current world order in the form of wars or any other societal and technological

developments, we would then travel to conferences where we can discuss the catastrophic nature of things and issue statements or calls for immediate change, but at the end we would still continue our journeys the same way as the day before: having lunches and dinners, traveling on planes, writing emails and organizing the next year’s conferences. So far so good. Until something really radical and tragic happens. Then we swiftly change our perspective and adapt to the new circumstances: we stop traveling, stop emailing, stop organizing conferences. In the end, what is it all about? Nothing else than coming together, enjoying the togetherness, giving some importance to it and telling tales – joyful or dreadful – to each other. The changes happen in and around us anyway, no matter what. Including stories of ‘Inner Change’, ‘Societal Change’, ‘Social Transformation’, ones with the ‘Butterfly Effect’ or with longer-term development of human capacities and resources ridiculing all fears of immediate collapse.

We can only observe all that as we are destined to take part in those processes based on our roles and histories anyway. Some of us might save some people, some of us may realise great things, some of us may make everything worse, but we all will cope with the individual and collective consequences of our actions whether they are based on karma, on divine guidance or simply on good or bad luck.

Does it sound rude? Maybe. It’s as good as offering ‘solutions’ to the world problems without any possibility of real change. In many situations I observed such speeches as ‘look good’ moments disguising some hypocrisy. I don’t know the real truth what’s happening around the world, and don’t have a solution to offer. Does anyone know? “All composite things pass away. Strive for your own liberation with diligence.”

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