

GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP AND SUSTAINABILITY A CONTEMPORARY MODEL OF BUDDHISM

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ABSTRACT

In today's world, focused as it is on profit and economic growth, it has become more necessary than ever to re-examine our objectives and rationales for growth and to be aware of other priorities.

Sustainability is not exclusively or even primarily an environmental issue. Rather it is fundamentally about how we choose to live our lives, with an awareness that everything has consequences.

At its heart sustainability is the work of constructing a society that accords highest priority to the dignity of life and to the dignity of all beings both present and future and to the environment that sustains us.

In order to achieve such sustainability it is necessary to develop people, communities and societies who benefit others and bring to the fore our most positive and creative aspects.

In this paper I will present some ideas and models for the development of people and institutions as a fundamental prerequisite for the achievement of sustainable development.

These will include active engagement and education of young people, the development of 'Global citizens' or people who who are genuinely concerned for the peace and prosperity of the world, and an educational framework promoting sustainability which should include a

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comprehensive awareness raising of learning, reflecting and empowering.

I will draw on buddhist theory and practice in order to achieve these outcomes and will show how Buddhism, whilst being an ancient wisdom based teaching, is also a thoroughly modern and contemporary philosophy which contains the potential to transform not only the individual but also societies and environments.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sustainability is not exclusively or even primarily an environmental issue. It is fundamentally about how we choose to live our lives, with an awareness that everything we do has consequences for the 7 billion of us here today, as well as for the billions more who will follow, for centuries to come. (Clark, 2012)

This powerful statement was part of the statement which Helen Clark of the UN Development Programme presented at the start of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) in 2012.

Although many societies continue to see economic growth as the priority, in order to achieve the sustainability which Helen Clark refers to above it is necessary to develop people, communities and societies who benefit others and bring to the fore their most positive and creative aspects.

At the heart of sustainability is the work of constructing a society that accords highest priority to the dignity of life and to the dignity of all beings both present and future and to the environment that sustains us.

It is easy to see present day society as consisting of powers which constantly seek opportunities for profit, and openings that allow economic or political advantage.

Society today seems to be enthralled by the amoral pursuit of the possible, largely unimpeded by ethical constraints. This is seen in the continued quest for armaments in order to intimidate others and in the global economic competition which holds issues of poverty and income disparities as indifferent.

Buddhism of course knows well the spiral of desire which eventually escapes our control. The issue of greed and desire lies

at the heart of many of the critical challenges which we face today. This unfortunately lies at the very heart of many of the challenges which face the world today. We see the prioritizing of economic growth whilst ignoring ecological degradation and economic crisis brought on by overheated speculation.

This is not to ignore the value of the pursuit of the possible which has often been an important aspect of development in the area of essential needs and food, clothing and improving health and welfare. Leading to advances in situations for people.

There is great benefit to these pursuits. This brings me to the educational Japanese thinker Tsunesaburo Makiguchi. He developed an idea of positive competition. This he expressed as being ‘to hone and refine people’s capacities and unleash their energy’ (Makiguchi) Date?

He goes on to say:

“We find progress and development where competition is strong and powerful; where it is hampered, either by natural or human factors, we find stagnation, immobility and regressions.”
(Makiguchi Date)

In his writing, Makiguchi sees the need to shift away from the military, political and economic competition in which benefit is sought for oneself with no thought to the sacrifices imposed on others. He called for a new form which he termed Humanitarian competition. “one protects, extends and advances the lives of others while doing the same for oneself” and “one benefits and serves the interests of others while profiting oneself.”

In this idea, the impulse to do something about one’s situation is oriented towards more valuable ends, generating happiness for both self and others.

In other words, as Buddhism might teach, anger or frustration, greed and self-interest, resulting in acts which might cause harm or degrade others, can be transformed into motivations for action to counter social ills and threats and to illuminate society with the qualities of courage and hope.

Political competition, based on hard power-struggles and self-

interest, which today is rife and can be extremely damaging to the society, can be transformed into a soft power to develop creative policies gaining respect from other countries.

This has been seen in recent history. For example, some forward looking governments and various nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) worked together some years ago in order to bring about the multilateral treaties banning antipersonnel mines and cluster bombs. This was brought about through the catalysing of each other's efforts and through pressurizing various countries to prioritize the humanitarian aspect over the pursuit of military technology.

I think that the point here is that human potential is infinite, as is the ability to create value within situations. Sustainability must be considered as a dynamic concept which relies on human striving to create positive value within all aspects of life.

Buddhism puts the power for creating one's life firmly in the hands of the individual person.

Human potential, unlike physical resources, is infinite as is an individuals' capacity to create value.

Referring back to the quote above from Helen Clark, I would say that sustainability is a dynamic concept in which we see striving or intention to generate positive value and share it in the world.

2. BODHISATTVAS EMERGING WITHIN THE WORLD

The *Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra* commonly called the Lotus Sutra, is a very popular and well known Buddhist text in East Asian Buddhism. It originated in India and was translated from Sanskrit to Chinese in China by Kumarajiva (344-413) It is one of the most popular and influential Mahayana Buddhist texts, and the basis on which several schools of Buddhism have been established.

The sutra contains parables and dramatic events which are amongst the most powerful in Buddhist literature. It is vast in its presentation of themes but I would like to focus on a few specific aspects of its teachings.

Chapter eleven of the Lotus Sutra opens with a fantastic and wondrous scene.

As the Buddha is teaching and right in front of him emerges a massive stupa.

At that time in the Buddha's presence there was a tower adorned with the seven treasures, five hundred yojanas in height and two hundred and fifty yojanas in width and depth, that rose up out of the earth and stood suspended in the air. Various kinds of precious objects adorned it. It had five thousand railings, a thousand, ten thousand rooms, and numberless streamers and banners decorated it. Festoons of jewels hung down and ten thousand million jewelled bells were suspended from it. All four sides emitted a fragrance of tamala leaves and sandalwood that pervaded the whole world. Its banners and canopies were made of the seven treasures, namely, gold, silver, lapis lazuli, seashell, agate, pearl, and carnelian, and it was so high it reached to the heavenly palaces of the four heavenly kings. The beings of the heaven of the thirty-three gods rained down heavenly mandarava flowers as an offering to the treasure tower, and the other heavenly beings, the dragons, yakshas, gandharvas, asuras, garudas, kimnaras, and mahoragas, the human and nonhuman beings, an assembly of thousands, ten thousands, millions, offered all kinds of flowers, incense, necklaces, streamers, canopies, and music as alms to the treasure tower, paying it reverence, honour, and praise.

At that time a loud voice issued from the treasure tower, speaking words of praise: "Excellent, excellent! Shakyamuni, world-honoured one, that you can take the great wisdom of equality, a teaching to instruct the bodhisattvas, guarded and kept in mind by the buddhas, the Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law, and preach it for the sake of the great assembly! It is as you say, as you say. Shakyamuni, world-honoured one, all that you have expounded is the truth!" (Watson. Trans 1993)

This voice is from the Buddha Prabhūtaratna who is a living Buddha sitting inside the tower. At the request of his disciples Shakyamuni rises into the air and takes his place beside Prabhūtaratna. This image of two Buddhas sat side by side can be seen often in Buddhist art. Within images of the treasure tower and in wall paintings and so on.

Prior to this event and during the time Shakyamuni was teaching, millions of Bodhisattvas had appeared from other worlds

and universes and, in Chapter 15 they determine that they will voluntarily remain in the world in order to teach and preserve the Lotus teaching.

However, Shakyamuni somewhat surprises them by stating that already there are plenty of Bodhisattvas in this world who will carry out the task.

Then from within the earth billions of bodhisattvas appear, ‘emerging from the earth.’

Shakyamuni explains that these people are his disciples whom he taught aeons previously and who are already on the path to Buddhahood. These are the ‘Bodhisattvas of the earth.’

The 13th Century Buddhist monk (priest) Nichiren interprets the treasure tower in the Lotus sutra as symbolizing the ultimate reality of life, which in his teaching he identifies as Nam-myoho-enge-kyo.. This dharma nature or reality has always existed but manifests only under certain conditions. The Buddha Prabhūtaratna represents the eternally enduring world of Buddhahood. Shakyamuni Buddha represents here a mortal Buddha, or Buddhahood manifest and active in this transient, actual world. Shakyamuni’s act of sitting himself beside Prabhūtaratna represents the fact that these two aspects of the Buddha—the eternal and the transient—are the same.

As Nichiren says ‘No treasure tower exists other than the figures of the men and women who embrace the Lotus Sutra” Here he is referring to those Bodhisattvas of the earth who vow to carry out the teachings and practice of the Lotus Sutra and to carry out the intention to live their lives fully and with total altruism.

In a letter to a follower, Nichiren explains where the ultimate reality exists. It is in the depths of the lives of all people. He writes, “No treasure tower exists other than the figures of the men and women who embrace the Lotus Sutra.” The kind of behaviour which Buddhism presents as an ideal way of living in the world is called the Bodhisattva life-state.

The Bodhisattva vow which is central to the Mahayana teaching, refers to the person undertaking to save others and bases all action

on this vow of a spontaneous expression of altruism. This is a commitment which the bodhisattva devotes her or his entire being. Bodhisattvas refuse to be discouraged by difficult challenges.

The Lotus sutra talks of the pure white lotus rising from the muddy waters of the pond. This analogy illustrates The Bodhisattva Way in the Lotus Sutra. This is also interpreted to mean that, as ordinary human beings we are able to rise up from the muddy waters of our karma and our suffering and to reveal our wonderful dharma nature and bodhisattva spirit. These people are then called the Bodhisattva of the earth. They emerge from the earth in the 15th chapter and are considered to be those of the essential teaching of the Lotus Sutra. Interpretations of the Lotus sutra agree that the bodhisattva practice is explained in many chapters within the text.

A contemporary Nichiren Buddhist organization, Soka Gakkai, explains on its web site, ‘The attributes and qualities of the Buddha are already within the life of each individual. The purpose of the Lotus Sutra, and the mission of those who practice it, is to activate the qualities of the Buddha inherent in the depths of life and bring them into the world. The Lotus Sutra is what connects these two realities. Nichiren formulated the practice of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo as the means of practicing the Lotus Sutra—of enabling the treasure tower to emerge within our lives. As a tool for this practice he inscribed a mandala—the Gohonzon—which depicts, in Chinese calligraphy, the Ceremony in the Air, and is a representation of the Buddha nature present in all things.’ (SGI web site)

Often in Buddhism, Bodhisattvas are seen as celestial beings, however it is clear from the story of the Treasure tower that the Bodhisattvas referred to here are those ordinary people who have decided to work towards the living a life of altruism and empowerment. They are the ordinary people who appear in the world and take on the responsibility to work towards helping others – The Bodhisattvas emerging from the earth.

The Bodhisattva is that person who takes on the struggles of the world, who expands their mind to see the suffering of others and who determines to make changes, positive changes in the ‘saha’ world or the world of human suffering. The Lotus Sutra ultimately

depicts the shift of individuals seeking transformation to individuals taking action to help others free themselves from suffering, the transformation from empowerment to leadership.

Buddhism teaches that the way of overcoming suffering does not exist in some way outside ourselves, rather through awakening to and manifesting our inner potential we transform ourselves and our minds towards leading others to happiness and security. In this way, our own inner transformation enables us to transform our own suffering into the intention and determination to improve society. This personal inner transformation is the starting point towards the process of peace. This is contrasted with attempts at external reforms based on abstract principles. The efforts at Inner transformation reveal that both positive and negative are found within the human mind and are non dual. Holding to and relying on external reforms often finds the negative outside of our minds, perceived as bad people or bad ideologies, and the positive is perceived to be internal to our mind.

Daisaku Ikeda, the Buddhist thinker and peace maker has said that this tendency to locate evil or negativity outside ourselves has caused great suffering to humanity, and this has been demonstrated time and time again through violent revolutions, civil wars, organized warfare and so on. This tendency to locate 'evil' outside of ourselves has often led to the sacrifice of real life for an abstract ideal. Therefore, we can say that progress towards peace begins and ends with self-mastery and of identifying evil or negativity as a personal, inner tendency that needs to be overcome and transformed through what we might term a human transformation or revolution.

As we see in the preamble to the UNESCO constitution:

The Governments of the States Parties to this Constitution on behalf of their peoples -declare:

That since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed;

That ignorance of each other's ways and lives has been a common cause, throughout the history of mankind, of that suspicion and mistrust between the peoples of the world through which their differences have all too often broken into war; (UNESCO Constitution 16 November 1945)

3. GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP

In the confusion of today's world moving, at it is, towards ultra-nationalism, hate crime, extreme racism and sexism more, the most pressing need is for those people who will respond with courage and imagination to the deepening world crisis of human dignity to stand up.

As Karl Jaspers has said;

Today we stand poised on the razors edge. We have to choose: to plunge onto the abyss of man's lostness, and the consequent extinction of all early life, or the leap to the authentic man/women and their boundless opportunities through self-transformation (Jaspers. 1967)

We cannot ignore the sufferings and threats to the dignity of those who share this world if we are to speak of the future of humankind.

The transformation of the self into the authentic man/women is the first important step toward world citizenship or Global Citizenship. Therefore, the shift in focus towards the welfare of humankind is a real and necessary requirement. This is not only a conceptual shift, but rather a day to day experience based upon the discipline of our spirits. The idea of global citizenship and a global civilization is not that which is mostly understood as the Western led attempt to impose the same socio-economic standards in every corner of the world, through the development of global markets for labour, goods and services, which may be considered to be a current form of cultural imperialism imposed, often through violent intervention. Rather a Global civilization can be considered to be a framework allowing people of different backgrounds and ideologies to participate together in the construction of a better world. This will depend on people's capacity for inner transformation, or Human Revolution. Ikeda describes this as 'the cultivation of the inner life of human beings and their spiritual elevation towards peace. 'Global Citizens can be considered to be part of a movement of people who are involved in, and dedicated to encouraging people to become aware of their own boundless inner power and to take responsibility for the welfare of humankind.' (Ikeda) This could

be considered to be a contemporary framing of the Bodhisattva vow. Those beings who vow to work towards the enlightenment of all beings.

Chapter four of the Lotus Sutra posits the concept of 'Inner Universalism'. To put it simply this concept affirms each person's intrinsic potential and value. This is at the basis of the concept inner transformation. Inner universalism can counteract the imposed from without and one size fits all universalism often found in Western Models. Global citizens are not abandoning other identities, such as allegiances to countries ethnicities or political beliefs. Rather they have an additional layer of responsibility for being members of a world-wide community of people who share the same global identity. Though individuals may not yet be fully awakened to this responsibility, it is there to be embraced in order to build a sustainable, values based world community.

We can say that Global citizenship involves three dimensions, awareness (of self and other) responsibility and participation. It is possible when people spontaneously undertake to live by these norms, to act with the bodhisattva spirit, refusing to ignore or abandon those who suffer, to carry out acts for the benefit of others, encouraging people. We can foster in each individual life the kind of active independent basis for altruistic behaviour exemplified in the bodhisattva vow. We can establish the fundamental foundation for an ethic of responsibility and commitment upon which a genuine culture of human rights and sustainability can flourish. As contemporary practitioners of Buddhism we can also consider ourselves as Global Citizens. Actually, the language of Global Citizenship may be more relevant for a contemporary world.

It is important that this work and action is based on dialogue, mutually enriching and trying to bring out the best in oneself and others. Through inner transformation one can enhance one's own courage, wisdom and compassion. The Mahayana tradition of the Lotus sutra (and many others) shows that the ultimate objective of Shakyamuni's life was revealed in the humanity he manifested in his behaviour and actions. The cultivation and perfection of a person's character is considered, in the Buddhist tradition, to be the ultimate goal of religious training. Then one can develop an identity as a

global citizen and contribute to the implementation of elements of an inclusive global civilization of harmony and interdependence.

In this short paper, I have begun to outline how Buddhism and aspects of Buddhist thought, specifically the bodhisattva vow and spirit, can contribute, in positive and valuable ways to contemporary civilization. There is much more to be said and developed. For example, we must consider how to bring ideas of Global citizenship into education. Not only through classroom instruction but through community based education. Also, the concept of interdependency is central to Buddhist thought and hugely relevant to future sustainability and human rights. I believe it is important for the future of Buddhism and the future of humanity, That we continue to clarify Buddhist principles in contemporary language and show how these ideas can be developed and how contemporary society can benefit from them.

Buddhism is an ancient, wisdom based teaching, and importantly, a valuable and often fresh way to consider and take action towards solving some of the world's most problematic issues.

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