



Engaged Buddhism & its Contributions to Sustainable Development and ESD

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Over the last five decades of its 2500 year history, the spread of the Buddhist faith worldwide has witnessed the emergence and growth of a movement known as “engaged Buddhism” or sometimes referred to as “socially engaged Buddhism” (Jones, 2003; Queen, 2000; King, 2009). As interpreted and enacted by individual practitioners, institutions, organizations or networks in both global South and North contexts, engaged Buddhism seeks to actively build a more compassionate, loving, nonviolent, just and sustainable world. For engaged Buddhists, their faith transcends individual-centred belief, understanding, rituals and a search for “enlightenment” to also encompass social action across all dimensions of life.

This growing interest and commitment to such an “engaged” perspective to Buddhism does not imply, however, that the Buddha himself and his teachings were “disengaged” or alienated from social practices and relationships. Throughout his journey as a teacher, following his “awakening”, the Buddha role-modelled to his disciples and followers not only the challenging goal of individual cultivation but also the active integration of Buddhist values, principles and knowledge into daily individual and community social living. Engaged Buddhists today

are re-reading and re-conceptualizing this holistic understanding of the Buddha’s teaching in the light of contemporary social, economic, political and cultural realities, thereby eschewing a socially passive and individually-centred practice that can develop in some traditions, schools or institutions.

Engaged Buddhist thinking and practice has spanned a wide range of fields and issues of societal and worldly responsibilities, problems, conflicts and peacelessness, including preventing and resolving armed conflicts and militarization, promoting human rights, dealing with social injustices, intercultural and interfaith understanding, harmony and dialogue, counseling for jail inmates and caring in hospices. Concomitant, however, with the emergence of awareness and of urgent advocacy to face and transcend the deepening ecological crisis, engaged Buddhists have also joined hands, hearts and spirit with peoples of diverse faiths or spirituality traditions or no professed faith, to build more sustainable futures. Drawing on basic principles, values and faith wisdom of Buddhism, engaged Buddhists have provided some helpful insights as well as concrete strategies and practices that promote “sustainable development” and education for sustainable development (ESD).

One of the key principles of Buddhist teachings, *pratityasamutpada* (in Sanskrit), or “inter-dependent co-arising” or “dependent origination,” which sees all things and phenomena as interdependent and arising from multiple causes and conditions (Thich Naht Hanh, 1998: 221-249), is clearly consistent with the “sustainable development” view of the “environment” (including humanity) as comprising interdependent dimensions and elements that interact mutually and are embedded in complex relationships of causes and effects. In this regard, Thich Nhat Hanh’s (1991) concept of “inter-being” provides a very meaningful tool for guiding human beings in relating holistically and responsibly with all other beings and parts of “nature” and our universe. If individuals, communities, organizations, agencies and nations continue to destroy the environment, all humanity will reap and suffer, as is happening now, from the consequences of pollution, loss of biodiversity, desertification, deforestation and climate change.

Other empowering values and principles of Buddhist teachings that complement the vision and practice of “sustainable development” include compassion and love or loving-kindness (King, 2009; Chappell, 2000; Thich Naht Hanh, 2010). They call on Buddhists to feel and enact a deep sense of compassion and loving-kindness towards all other beings and parts of the universe. Not only should human beings act compassionately and lovingly towards all other species, including protecting biodiversity and avoiding harmful, inhumane or violent treatment of other sentient beings, but we are also moved by our compassion and loving-kindness to feel the same suffering of others, near or far, affected by unsustainable actions (e.g., human-made ecological destruction; cruelty to animals, wars and militarization which also negatively affect the environment, etc). This empathy arising from compassion and loving-kindness, motivates engaged Buddhists to act in ways that help alleviate or overcome the suffering, especially via actions designed to address the root causes of the ecological

crisis. In the Mahayana tradition, the *Bodhisattva* vow provides another empowering catalyst for selfless and virtuous action to help all other beings overcome suffering, including that arising from ecological destruction (Kornfield, 2009: 352-366). Furthermore, the Buddha’s firm teaching on non-harming and non-killing that “violence cannot be ceased by violence” reminds Buddhists to seek personal and social transformation for sustainable futures using nonviolent means.

Thirdly and critically, the Buddha’s core teaching of the Four Noble Truths emphasizes the necessity to overcome attachments or cravings, such as greed, ill-will and delusion, which, if not transcended, fuel a continuing cycle of “suffering”. This insight is most relevant to the problem of an unsustainable paradigm of “development” and “progress” reflected in the dominant over-consumerist and over-materialist economic, social and cultural order. As the Siamese engaged Buddhist, Sulak Sivaraksa (2009), and his colleagues in the International Network of Engaged Buddhists and engaged analysts like Ken Jones (2003), David Loy (2002) and Kaza (2010) have emphasized, this aggressive and limitless drive for narrowly defined economic growth, profit-maximization, and unfettered competition, has accelerated environmental destruction, widening rich-poor gaps within and across nations, and human suffering and violations of human rights to basic needs and dignities. In this regard, too many large and powerful transnational corporations, backed by home nations and facilitated by recipient governments and local elites, have aggravated unsustainable exploitation of human and natural resources which contradicts principles of “sustainable development” (Shiva, 2005; Madeley, 2008). Psychologically, psychically and culturally, especially in industrialized North societies and affluent circles in South nations, such attachment to insatiable consumer “wants” and “brands” can be “met” only by more extensive and intensive environmental depletion, while a majority of humanity suffers from a lack of basic needs. In

turn, this craving for more and more in an endless cycle will self-impose an overwhelming barrier towards “enlightenment” or nirvana.

Inspired by these various values and principles integral to Buddhist philosophy and ethics, engaged practitioners worldwide have therefore actively participated in a range of social, political, and economic initiatives, programmes or campaigns that help to promote “sustainable development” and education for sustainable development. In Asia, for example, forest monks in Thailand have mobilized the rural poor who have suffered from the effects of destructive logging to engage in “tree ordination” ceremonies to protect their remaining forests (King, 2000: 130-135). Sulak Sivaraksa, the Siamese engaged Buddhist lay leader, has tirelessly advocated for a Buddhist economics based on wisdom, compassion, sustainable fulfillment of basic needs for all, environmental protection and spiritual cultivation. Several Thai NGOs and Asian peoples’ networks, which includes representatives of other diverse faiths and cultures, apply engaged Buddhism and other faith principles to educate and catalyze marginalized rural and urban peoples to challenge dominant economic and globalization policies rooted in structural violence and pursue alternative people-centred just and sustainable development.

Likewise, the Sarvodaya movement in Sri Lanka founded by A.T. Ariyaratne and presently coordinated by Vinya Ariyaratne, has, for several decades, integrated sustainability values and practices in its village development programmes (Jones, 2003: 185-189). In its post-tsunami disaster recovery work, the Sarvodaya Shanti Sena (Peace Brigades) engaged affected villages in inter alia ecological rehabilitation and education projects (Ariyaratne, n.d.). The Soka Gakkai International community that began in Japan has also contributed much to education and strategies for sustainable development.

In North America, as Kaza (2000) has usefully summarized, a growing number of engaged Buddhist individuals and faith and lay communities or organizations have applied Buddhist values and principles to environmental activism. Advocacy and campaigns include nonviolent education and action to protect old growth forests, humane treatment of animals (including commercial farms), the nuclear waste guardianship initiative mobilized by Joanna Macy, centres and retreats promoting vegetarianism, sustainable management of land and water resources, meditation, and other eco-social activities that synergize engaged Buddhist teachings with deep ecology principles.

At the core of these engaged Buddhist initiatives is clearly an affirmation that “development” needs to be mindful of the goal and processes of inner cultivation that transcends attachment to or craving for unlimited possessions. In recent years, this perspective has been further elaborated by the “Gross National Happiness” movement that was inspired by Bhutan’s attempt to transform orthodox economic indicators such as GNP in directions that are more consistent with sustainable development principles (King Khesar, 2008).

An increasingly visible dimension of engaged Buddhism also lies in the active participation of its practitioners in the growing interfaith dialogue movement worldwide. Consistent with the Buddha’s teachings of non-discrimination and loving-kindness towards all beings, Buddhists are called upon to show profound respect of other faiths and to engage in peaceful and harmonious dialogue that deepens mutual understanding and solidarity. Through local and global interfaith and interreligious movements and networks, such as Religions for Peace, the Parliament of the World’s Religions and United Religions International, engaged Buddhists and followers of diverse other faiths have affirmed their sharing of common “green” values and principles. In its formative years, the Multi-faith Centre at Griffith University in Australia helped to bring together faith communities and leaders at national, regional

and international levels in dialogues and solidarity actions including the theme of “sustainable development” and sustainable futures (Toh & Cawagas, 2006). This affirmation in turn has been transformed into joint action for sustainable futures, such as the Alliance for Religions and Conservation, and in recent years, working together to address urgent ecological problems like climate change (Toh & Cawagas, 2010a). In this regard, at the 2009 Parliament of the World’s Religions in Melbourne, Australia, engaged Buddhists played a major role in organizing interfaith dialogues on climate change culminating in a petition mural signed by Parliament delegates that was then brought to the global climate change summit in Copenhagen.

Moreover, as a peace educator endeavoring to integrate engaged Buddhist values and principles and complementary sustainability ideas and practices from other diverse faiths and cultures as well as global initiatives such as the Earth Charter, I have also been mindful of the need to practice appropriate pedagogies (Toh, 2004). I share with educators for sustainable development a firm commitment to non-banking, creative, participatory and dialogical teaching-learning strategies to develop a deep understanding of the root causes of unsustainable “development” accompanied by critical empowerment for individual and social action to build sustainable futures. Hence, as this brief review has shown, while engaged Buddhist values, principles and practices can contribute insights, experiences and role-models relevant to ESD, the pedagogical tools of ESD (Fien, 2002) and other transformative fields of education (e.g., peace education, human rights education, development education, intercultural education, etc.) (Toh & Cawagas, 2010b) will also be very helpful for engaged Buddhists building a “greener” world. Action to save the planet and humanity will not be effective and sustainable unless grounded in mindful understanding and analysis arising from critical and empowering educational processes.

Although a positive and hopeful perspective has been presented in this exploration of engaged Buddhism’s contributions to “sustainable development” and ESD, a concluding caveat is in order. Buddhist teachings and wisdom have always reminded its practitioners to exercise the value of humility and self-criticism, since the process of cultivation towards “enlightenment” is full of challenges and barriers. For example, Buddhist individuals, denominations, communities and organizations will need to be constantly vigilant, introspective and self-interrogating in terms of their own “sustainability” practices, conduct and priorities. This self-criticism extends across a range of dimensions, including infrastructure (temples, monasteries and building impact on the environment, etc.), energy-use policies, recycling, willingness and courage to speak out openly about unsustainable and environmentally destructive “development” programmes and projects, counseling followers to rethink consumerism and the integration of ESD in the faith formation of monks, nuns and lay Buddhists. On his deathbed, the Buddha’s final words of advice to his disciples, exhorted them to go forth and seek “salvation” with diligence. In the contemporary context, as the ecological crisis deepens, threatening the very survival of humanity and planet Earth, this advice surely includes a profound appeal to diligently educate for and build a sustainable, compassionate and loving world.

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