

Buddhist Response to Sustainable Development: Theory & Practice

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Sustainability and sustainable development are about collective values and related choices. Sustainable development has been defined in many ways, but the most frequently quoted definition is from our common future, also known as the Brundtland Report:¹

“Sustainable development is development that meets the need of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concept: the concept of needs, in particular the essential needs of the world’s poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment’s ability to meet present and future needs.”

The concept of sustainable development can be interpreted in many ways, but at its core is an approach to development that looks to balance different,

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1. World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), Our Common Future, P.43, Oxford: Oxford university Press, 1987,

and often competing, needs against an awareness of the environmental, social, and economic limitations of a society. It could be argued that sustainable development is strongly associated with a moral imperative that apparently no one can ignore or reject, without having to provide a very good reason for dissent, content, interpretation, and the implementation of this. Buddhism propounds the same undertaking between human and development. Its idea of dependent origination gives a view on sustainable development. Sustainable development is a process that requires use of existing resources without compromising them for future generations. It requires us to visualize the world as a system that connects space and time. The *pratityasamutpada*, or inter-dependent, co-arising, or dependent origination, which sees all things and phenomena as interdependent and arising from multiple cause and conditions, is clearly consistent with the goal of Sustainable development. It views the environment as comprising interdependent dimensions and elements that interact mutually and are embedded in complex relationship of causes and effects. The Buddhist virtues, precepts, and principles are the foundations which develop peace, happiness, harmony, compassion, wisdom, care, sharing, and socio-economic equality in the society. In this case there is a strong relationship between the spirituality, social, and economic development facets which signifies that they co-exist and go together. The pillars of establishing socio-economic development and equalities are elucidated in the various *sutras*. It shows that because of craving, all sufferings and struggle originate. The Buddha explained the ways to earn and share the wealth virtuously and trail the path of spirituality to establish peace, harmony, and equality in the society. The *Nikāyas* clearly state that poverty is the cause of immorality and crimes such as theft, falsehood, violence, hatred, cruelty, etc. Buddhism is against the lustful attachment towards insatiable things. Consumption according to Buddhism is not the final goal of a society. It serves another objective if taken in proper perspective (without craving towards them); it permits achievement of the higher state of *Nirvana*. The keen observation on recommendation of United Nation Economic and Social council suggests that Buddhist teaching could form a model to fulfil minimum goals and aspirations for post 2015 Development Agenda set up by United Nation Economic and Social Council.

The inter-relation between man and nature influences social institution and also creates numerous social problems. When these problems go beyond the control of man, governments are forced to intervene, and this is well illustrated in the *Agganna Sutta*.² The *Cakkavattisihanad Sutta*³ and the *Kutadanta Sutta*⁴ also insist on the necessity of a state policy regarding sustainable approach towards life. The *Mangala Sutta*⁵ and *Cakka Sutta*⁶ show how a good environment becomes conducive to progress. The *Ratthapala Sutta*⁷ shows dissatisfaction leads to conflict and destruction; this is further elaborated in the *Culadukkhakkhandha Sutta*.⁸ All these show the compelling need of a properly understanding policy for progressive attitude and harmonious coexistence. The depreciation and destruction of resources without thinking are problems of recent times. Industrial development, technological revolutions, urbanization, and above all the spread of consumerism are among the major contributory factors for these problems. These were non-existent during the pre-Christian era and hence there are no particular discourses in *Tripitaka* dealing with these problems. Yet, as Buddhism is a religion concerned with the man and the world in which he lives, it presents certain ideas about the attitude that should be adopted with regard to nature.⁹ The *Dhammapada*¹⁰ says that men driven by fear seek refuge in forest groves, trees, and mountains. Man got frightened of nature because he failed to understand nature. The *Agganna Sutta* explains how things manifest clearly when their origins are known.¹¹ It very vividly brings out the essential relations among human nature, environment, ethics, politics, and economy. The message that the canon offers is that sustainable approaches could be solved only by understanding the doctrine of Dependent Origination. The *Dhammapada*¹²

2. Digha Nikāya. III,80

3. Ibid. III,61.

4. Ibid. I, 160-172

5. Sutta Nipata. V. 260.

6. Anguttara Nikāya. II,32.

7. Majjhima Nikāya. II. 54.

8. Ibid, I,91.

9. Lily de Silva, 'The Buddhist Attitudes Toward Nature', P.9 in *Buddhist Perspective on Eco-crises*, Klas Sandel (ed.), Kandy: BPS, 1987.

10. Dhammapada, V. 183.

11. Digha Nikāy. III, 80.

12. Dhammapada. V. 80.

says irrigators lead the waters, carpenters bend the wood, and the wise control themselves. This suggests that man could use resources to suit his needs. It appears that Buddhism approves such adaptation for the benefit of man.¹³ This could be successfully done only if one perfectly understands how nature functions. The *Accayika Sutta*¹⁴ *Khetta Sutta*¹⁵ and *Nidana Sutta*¹⁶ all occurring in the *Anguttara Nikāya* present clues as to how one could get this understanding. Both the *Sigalovada Sutta* and the *Dhammapada* employ the simile of a bee that collects honey from flowers without harming it, to explain how a person, who properly understands the workings of nature, taps it for his benefit. Not only does the bee not harm the flower, but helps the process of pollination. The Buddhist admonition is to utilize resources in the same way as a bee collects pollen from flowered, neither polluting its beauty nor depleting its fragrance. Just as the bee manufactures honey out of pollen, so man should be able to find happiness and fulfilment in life without harming the natural world in which he lives.¹⁷ The natural resources are not a divine creation effected for the use of man and, hence one should not consider that nature is meant solely for one's benefit. Instead, men should accept the right of all other beings to live on earth. Man gets the opportunity of living on earth only if there is harmony among humans, animals, and plant life. The *Metta Sutta* conveys this message and the *Bhuripanna Jataka*¹⁸ describes the breaking of a branch that provides shade as an unfriendly act. It is popularly accepted that the Buddha, too, showed gratitude to the *bodhi* tree under which he attained enlightenment. It can be said that the Buddhists take pride in their sensitivity and coexistence with nature.¹⁹ It is necessary for man to realize that he is not the lord of nature, for just as nature, man too is subject to impermanency. In the true sense of the word there is nothing he could call 'I' or 'Mine'. Both his body and mind are causally dependent.

13. Mahinada Palihawadana. 'Man in Nature and Man above Nature' P.34 In *Man Nature*, Colombo 1979.

14. *Anguttara Nikāya*. I. 339.

15. *Ibid* I. 229.

16. *Ibid* I.134.

17. Lily de Silva. *op. cit.* P.28

18. *Jātaka*, no. 452

19. Douglas M.P. *The Population Crises and Conservation in Buddhist Perspectives*, P. 17, Kandy: BPS, 1977

It is depending on conditions that consciousness arises. It is depending on conditions that consciousness arises. It is essential that man should realize that he is merely a part of nature. The danger of being ignorant of this fact is well explained by the fact that Man has been so enchanted by scientific and technological progress that he is misled into the belief that he has almost completely conquered nature and has control over it. He also believes that with his conquest of nature, all problems will be solved, and heaven will be established on earth. But he is not aware that nature that he thinks he has conquered is not the whole of it, but only a part of it, possibly a half of it, that is the external material world. The other half is within himself, the nature of the man as a part of nature. In the process of struggle to conquer the material world of nature man even often neglects his responsibility to master the inner nature within himself, and tends to lose control over it. Conversely this inner nature has grown stronger and has taken much control over him.²⁰ Due to this misconception about his superiority over nature, man unwittingly gets self-alienated. It is only man who can realize the relation between man and nature

Being endowed with the correct understanding about the relationship between himself and nature, man should not act in any way that is harmful to system. Instead he should conserve and help the development process. In the *Kutadanta Sutta*²¹ king Mahavijita explains how it was done without harming any life, not exploiting labour, not killing a single animal. It can be said that what emerges as the point of Brahmanical sacrifice on the grounds of economic wastefulness, cruelty to animals, forced labour with harsh treatment of animals.²² The simile of the 'fig-fruit glutton' (*udumtarakhadika*) describes a man who, in order to eat fig fruits, causes many fruits to fall and eats only a few and abandons the remaining lot. This sort of waste is utterly condemned in Buddhism.²³ The *Vinaya Pitaka* says that people believed that trees have life, and hence cutting of trees is considered a *pacittiya* offence for monks.²⁴ In

20. Phra Rajavaramuni, 'Freedom, Individual and Society' P.31 Logos, Vol. 26 No. I, 1987.

21. Digha Nikāya. I, 141.

22. Therevor Ling. *The Buddha Pelican Books*, P.84, 1976,

23. Anguttara Nikāya. IV 281.

24. Vinaya Pitaka, IV, 34.

the *Dhammapada*²⁵ using the word `vana` meaning both defilements and forest, the Buddha says, cut `vana` (defilements) but not the `rukka` (trees). The Buddha uses this purposely to emphasize the fact that trees should be protected.²⁶ Under normal circumstances it is an *dukkata* offence for a monk either to urinate or to spit in a place where there is fresh grass.²⁷ The *Vanaropa Sutta* also focuses the attention on the importance of protection, conservation, and development. This *Sutta* says people who are engaged in such activities will prosper both in this world as well as in the next.²⁸ It draws attention to aspects such as the planting of trees, forests, and orchards, the construction of bridges and houses, and the supply of water etc.²⁹, all of which are, at present, projects undertaken at national and even global level. A very comprehensive and a socially beneficial environmental policy is presented in this *Sutta*.³⁰ Environmental problems were not so rampant during the Buddha's time, hence, this shows how futuristic is the Buddha's approach regarding sustainability. Deforestation, water-pollution, lack of a proper system of irrigation are all causing severe problems at present. The reference to bridge builders (*setukaraka*) shows the emphasis laid on an efficient system of transportation and communication. Housing has become a very acute problem; declaration of an international year of housing itself shows the magnitude this problem has reached. The Buddha's foresight with regard to this is seen from the *Kimdada Sutta*³¹ of *Samyutta Nikāya* which describes the giver of a house as the giver of everything. The stress and irritation caused by pollution of sound is also a major cause of worry in the present world, and the Buddha has focussed his attention on this aspect of environmental pollution.³² Many *Suttas* clearly say that the contemporaries of the Buddha were much surprised by the calm adopted

25. *Dhammapada*. V.283.

26. Ven. Piyadassi. *Buddhadharmaya ha Parisera samrakshanaya* (in Sinhala), P.20, Colombo, 1985.

27. *Vinaya Pitaka*. IV, 205.

28. *Samyutta Nikāya*. I. 33.

29. Ven. Bellanwila Wimalaratana. *Buddhism, Society and Environment*, P. 32, Colombo 1989.

30. *Ibid*. P. 53.

31. *Samyutta Nikāya*. I 32.

32. Robert Arvi. *Man and Environment*, P. 118, Penguin Books, 1978.

by the Buddha and his disciples. The *Samannaphala Sutta*³³ says that King Ajatassattu was somewhat apprehensive about the dead sojourning with a large following of disciples. In fact, he suspected whether this arranged visit of his to the Buddha was a plot to hand him over to his enemies. When selecting places of residence for monks, solitude and noiselessness of the place were given special consideration.³⁴ The Buddha often advised monks that they should either engage in righteous talk or maintain golden silence.³⁵ The *Bhayabherava Sutta* points out that even the slightest sound could disturb an uncontrolled mind.³⁶ Professor Lily de Silva very eloquently brings out the chaotic consequences of sound pollution that takes place at present.³⁷ Contribution of sustainable development to aesthetic enjoyment is also discussed in canonical literature. The ordinary worldling, as he is full of defilements and overwhelmed by desire for possession, is unable to really enjoy the beauty of forest grove's where ordinary people find no pleasure.³⁸ The *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*³⁹ makes reference to a number of such beautiful groves. Poems of Kaludai inviting the Buddha to visit *Kapilavastu* show how the saints appreciated the exquisite beauty of nature.⁴⁰

When one takes into consideration the rapid population growth, continuous technological revolution, and urbanization it becomes quite clear that it is the paramount responsibility to formulate a policy covering such areas as proper use of environment, its conservation and prevention of its pollution. It would be calamitous if proper steps are not taken to arrest depletion of certain natural resources which are threatened with total extinction. The arbitrary activities of man who is spurred by profit-making motives should be checked not only because these activities destroy nature, but also because they also obstruct equal distribution of these natural resources. The attention of the state should be directed

33. Digha Nikāya. I. 50.

34. Vinaya Pitaka. I, 39.

35. Majjhima Nikāya. P.II.

36. Ibid. I. 16.

37. Lily de Silva. op. cit. P.22.

38. Dhammapada. V.98.

39. Digha Nikāya. II, 72.

40. Klass Sandell. Eco- crisis P. 24

towards living beings, vegetation, and also minerals and other natural resources. The state should formulate rules regarding use of these resources and also promulgate sanctions against any infringement of these rules. Excessive consumption has now developed into a problem of global magnitude. This is closely linked to such other problems as security, threats of war, and pollution of environment. A body of world experts has published a report in 1987 entitled *Solutions for a Troubled World* wherein they scrutinize these issues and suggest solutions. It has been observed that man is used to being given top priority in choosing in the type of social system we want to live in. That must change. Nuclear weapons force us now to give priority to a world security system, because without security there may be no human society left to inherit a better social system. A deteriorating global eco-system forces us now to give equal priority to a clean environment, since without a clean environment no human society may be left, to inherit a better social system.⁴¹ It has been pointed out that the Americans in a period of forty years have consumed what the whole humanity has been consumed during a long period of four thousand years.⁴² There is evidence to show that an average American consumes four to five times more than an average consumer in the developing countries.⁴³ It has been pointed out that “over consumption has inspired experts to coin the term overdevelopment, to capture the level of excess consumption in the industrialized west.⁴⁴ Existentialist and imperial policies, the ensuring wars and the proliferation of arms, subjugation of poor and under-developed countries, and their falling into indebtedness are for most part linked to harmful environment policies prompted by desire for overconsumption. Padmasri de Silva⁴⁵ comments on these rash policies saying that a “violent and aggressive approach to the natural world is fed by man’s greed for short-term spectacular success without care for long-term ill-effects on another generation”. The values in the society have deteriorate due to materialistic and exclusive pursuit

41. Jan Tinbergen. *Solutions*. P. 59.

42. Vance Pakard. *The Waste Makers*, P.195 London, 1961.

43. Ahamad Abubakar, *solutions*, P.193, 1967

44. *Ibid*, P.192.

45. Leif Sandholt, ‘Western Affluence and the Third World Poverty’, P. 94, in *People and Planet*, Right Livelihood Award Speeches, 1987,

of wealth. The selfish approach has made the human society disregard and forget the morals, ethics, kindness, and compassion. The biggest problem humanity has created for itself is the increasing gap between the rich and the poor and the unequal society structure. Poverty, hunger, malnutrition, disease, illiteracy, unemployment, and social discrimination continues to be the scourge of our times. The things that matter most – meaning, purpose, community, love—might be harder than ever to find. To lead a happy and content life and maintain the socio-economic equalities in the society, it is important to look into both spiritual and material development needs. Spiritual development alone or material development alone is not adequate to lead a happy life. However, when a person concentrates only on material aspects as happening in the present modern capitalist system, the material needs may become an end in itself, resulting in limitless desires, greed and craving. The consequences of materialistic behaviour give rise to conflicts, disharmony, social and economic inequalities in the society. These inequalities have resulted in further aggravating the suffering in the present modern world. The world is passing through difficult times in spite of scientific and technological progress. The goal of just and peaceful civilization continues to be elusive and the man made panacea has failed to provide peace, happiness and harmony in the society. The solution for this suffering lies in the practice of spirituality. Buddhist middle path balances both spirituality and materialism to lead the contented life on the principles of sharing and caring. Buddhist virtues, precepts, and principles focus on establishing peace and harmony through spiritual and socio-economic development in the society. The virtue regulates the behaviour, strengthens the meditation, and in turn develops wisdom. The virtue tends to elevate the man which all can cultivate irrespective of creed, colour, race, or sex, and the earth can be transformed into a paradise where all can live in perfect peace and harmony as ideal citizens of one world. The Buddhists four sterling virtues that act as building blocks of spiritual and socio-economic development, *Metta*, *Karuna*, *Mudita*, *Upekka*, which are collectively termed as *Brahma-viharas*, are means to develop friendship, harmonious relationship, removing discord, and establishing peace within oneself. The practice of *pancasila* as advocated by Buddha- (i) To abstain from

killing and harming any living being. The first *sila* tells protection of every human and animals. It means the abstinence from destruction of life. We should not kill any living being. Buddha taught never to destroy by hate any being. We should develop kindness and love towards all creatures. (ii) To abstain from stealing or taking which is not given—It means to accept anything without provided any kind of a person is theft. Buddha says that a disciple knowing the *Dhamma* should refrain from stealing anything at any place, should not cause another to steal anything, should not consent to the acts of those who steal anything, and should avoid every kind of theft. (iii) To abstain from any evil lustful conduct in lapse of *brahmaccarya* practice by body, by speech, and by mind—The third educates to abstain from sexual immorality. The world's most violent excitement is sexuality. Therefore, people should always stay away from sexuality. (iv) To abstain from frivolous speech or falsity—Buddha teaches abstention from lying through fourth *sila*. Everyone should avoid all kind of lies. *Suttanipata* states when one comes to an assembly or gathering, he should not tell lies to any one, or causes any to tell lies, or consent to the acts of those who tell lies; he should avoid every kind of untruth. Humans should stay away from the lie. He should not sacrifice the truth in any situation. (v) To abstain from intoxicating drinks and narcotic drugs—Buddha educates all humans to stay away from all types alcohol and drugs through the last modesty. A good householder who is interested in virtues – he should not take any drugs. Those who are drinkers, their alcohol will not support them. The alcohol makes a man frantic or mad. Ignorant people do evil actions by taking alcohol. You should refrain from it. This produces sin. This creates madness and it is the home of ignorance. Intoxication destroys glory of a person before the society. This gives rise to conflict and disease. Individuals do not care about their garments. A person does not carry self-pride and becomes incapable of learning. It is concluded that these *pancasila*, which are revealed by Buddha, are socially strong and human beneficial. Societies accept any theories according its time and country. It is due to the influence of Buddhism that a society does not respect such kind any person who is violent, steals , lies, and is an adulterer in the modern era of 21st century. When the *pancasila* should make a part of

human life then they (*Pancasila*) will be relevant. During the last four decades or so inter-relationship among nations increased by leaps and bounds, and consequently there arose many new problems, making it necessary the establishment of international organization to solve them. Now the world has reached a stage where laws, regulations and decisions made in a particular country being to have repercussions beyond national boundaries. Environmental pollution one of the issues that severely affects the economy, and 'acid rain' causes much concern, for its effects spread far beyond the national boundaries of the country responsible for its creation. So is the effect of deforestation. It is because of such calamitous problems that may be called for a more humanistic kind of management, which operates at an international level. Even developed countries are now compelled to depend on other countries for scarce or fast diminishing natural resources and markets for their products. This situation has caused many mutually related problems in the economic and defence sectors. The world Commission on Environment and Development has brought into focus many examples of Interdependence of nations. All these factors point towards the conclusion that now the world has become so small that most of the problems faced by man have to be dealt with according to a plan agreed upon by common consensus. Furthermore, these problems should be solved with the proper understanding of limits, for otherwise there is a threat to mankind's existence itself. Hence, it has become very necessary to get a good grasp of the doctrine of *paticcasamuppada* as present in the *Nikāyas*; through it see the mutual relations among the varied problems faced by man and then attempt to solve them, being fully mindful of the principle of consciousness of limits. The only way to achieve success in this is to culture and nature the mind with such qualities as friendliness, compassion, generosity, equality etc. Whether one calls it the Buddhist way or not this is the only way; for what really matters is not the name, but how effective the way is. It is said that the truth is one and there is no second. The man is able to see it and solve his problems through it. If man discards his dependence on external powers, understands the interdependent nature of everything, adopts a deep humanistic attitude towards the whole mankind, obtains a proper knowledge about the 'limits', and then diligently and

earnestly strives to solve the problems that confront him, then this itself would be the Buddhist economic philosophy presented by the canon.

It is possible to conclude that (i) Proper understanding could be developed with the help of Buddhism to harness our existing resources and protect it for future generation. This vision would be based on principles recommended by United Nations Social and Economic Council. (ii) Man should not be frightened of nature, but should understand it and coexist with it; (iii) through this understanding he should make the best use of nature, even changing and adjusting it when it is required. (iv) These changes and adjustments should be effected without harming nature, but (v) instead should enhance and foster nature. (vi) Man should, through the use of these nature resources, produce things. (vii) While conserving nature, man should also appreciate it. (viii) Man should never consider himself to be superior to nature, but instead should consider himself to be a part and parcel of it. (ix) The man should consider that destruction of nature amounts to his own destruction and (x) man should develop his personality in a way that enables him to love it. It is seen that in the present, the concept of development has shot into prominence and received numerous interpretation. Problems of contemporary importance and relevance are coming to light in international flora, and some of these problems pertain to technological development, environmental issues, nuclear warfare, and the gap between haves and have-nots. There are many other issues such as population explosion, the people's view on the most suitable form of government, public expression, and freedom of communication, and so on which are of paramount importance to the present world. Limitedness of natural resources, developmental targets, and use of technology has made the world understand the importance of 'consciousness of limits' with regard to all forms of consumption. Now, there is an attempt to see the interrelation among all problems; and this itself brings to light the fact that the question of existence of mankind.