

Sustainable Lifestyles in Community

A Buddhist Perspective

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I should like to begin with some quotations: "The existing system has taken the word 'sustainability' to its heart, and now employs it at every turn, but in a context which deprives it of its meaning. For sustainability is the most basic form of conservatism. It means not taking from the earth, from the world, from society, from each other, from life, more than we give back. But when industrial society uses the word, it means the sustaining of itself, no matter what the cost. It means sustaining privilege, sustaining poverty, sustaining abuse of the earth, sustaining inequality, sustaining starvation, sustaining violence. To sustain the existing system, to defend the status quo, is neither conservative nor sustainable. It is not even a status quo. For what is called the status quo is a form of continuous depletion, of entropy. And such conservatism will perish if it is not subjected to a radical reevaluation. (from Trevor Blackwell and Jeremy Seabrook, "Revolt against Change: Towards a Conserving Radicalism", Vintage, London, 1993, pp.96-7.)

In "A Sense of Community" in Resurgence No. 172, Geoff Mulgan argues that Bookchin, Illich and Schumacher have reasserted the primacy of small communities taking responsibility for their own condition of life. Across a range of disciplines, thinking has turned to biology, the nature of living systems, and to principles of self-organization as the only viable way to cope with change and complexity. Mulgan says: "At the core of the idea of community are three basic principles which are not only important, but also helpful in thinking about a more sustainable politics for the next century:

"The first is the simple recognition of people's social nature and, one might add, of the sociability, sense of fairness, sympathy and duty that evolutionary psychologists now see as hardwired into our genetic make-up. Two hundred years of history have done much to nurture institutions for freedom and equality, but very little for the fraternity and solidarity that hold societies together. Yet this softer value - a social capital that enables people to work together, to trust each other, to commit to common causes - has proved absolutely critical to societal success, whether in narrow economic terms or in terms of well-being.

"The second principle is about scale. Community is deliberately a different word for society. It may refer to neighbourhoods or workplace, but to be meaningful it must imply membership in a human- scale collective: a scale at which it is possible to encounter people face to face...[and] to nurture human- scale structures within which people can feel at home. Social science is ill at ease with such ideas. Strangely, there is very little theory about the importance of scale and form in economics and sociology (unlike in biology where thinkers like D'Arcy Thompson long ago made the connection).

"The third principle is a reassertion of ethics - the recognition that any viable politics needs to be prepared to make judgments about behaviour, and about what types of behaviour work against the common interest and against the interest of future generations. Without a strong sense of personal ethics, societies require an unacceptable level of policing and contracts; and without a strong sense of personal responsibility it is inevitable that costs will be shunted out onto the natural environment and onto future generations... ."

Buddhist Perspectives

In Buddhism, communities are known as Sangha, which should be small, autonomous and decentralized. The objective of the Sangha is to live together in harmony with oneself, with the community and with one's natural surroundings - not to exploit oneself or other sentient beings. The lifestyle should be simple, contented, self-reliant and mindful, in order to restructure one's consciousness from selfishness to a state of greater selflessness, i.e. to overcome greed, hatred and delusion.

Once a member of the Sangha can cultivate peace within, he or she can develop critical self awareness to find his or her best potentialities. Together with other members of the community or other communities, they can link as good friends so that together they can reconstitute the community or communities to be harmonious and peaceful.

Gandhi's ideas of the village republic are similar to the Buddha's ideas of Sangha. Buddhadasa Bhikkhu says: "The entire cosmos is a cooperative. The sun, the moon, and the stars live together as a cooperative. The same is true for humans and animals, trees and soil. Our bodily parts function as a cooperative. When we realize that the world is a mutual, interdependent, cooperative enterprise, that human beings are all mutual friends in the process of birth, old age, suffering and death, then we can build a noble, even heavenly environment. If our lives are not based in this truth, then we shall all perish."

In the Buddhist context, sustainable lifestyles are possible if people live in small communities, surrounded by natural habitats; the achievement of human freedom and of a community is possible when the individual's interests are in harmony with that of the whole.

In Buddhism, the basic teaching is the Four Noble Truths: The Truth of Suffering, the Truth of the Cause of Suffering, the Truth of the Cessation of Suffering, and the Truth of the Path to the Cessation of Suffering. Some monks and laity, trapped by consumerism and the social structure, do not want to confront suffering and try to escape from it. This can lead to a luxurious lifestyle which is harmful to oneself and others. Yet people blindly adhere to such a lifestyle in the hope that one can perhaps be happy with material comfort.

Those Thai monks who are aware that they themselves come from the poorest of the poor, who suffer more and more materially - not to mention legally and culturally, have now found out that the monkhood and the laity are really interrelated. They want to help the laity to be liberated from suffering and quite a number of them do so in very meaningful ways.

I will quote a few instances to illustrate my point.

(1) Surin, a very poor northeastern province, has a large population of ethnic Cambodians. They were told by the government that they were second class citizens since they spoke Khmer more naturally than Thai. This came about when the name of the country was changed from Siam to Thailand in 1939, and especially since 1949. Until then the people were poor but were proud of their culture and language. Buddhist monks were their leaders, culturally, educationally, ethically and spiritually. They lived harmoniously among themselves and with other ethnic groups as well as with elephants and the forest around them.

Since the development decades from the 1960s onward, modern roads and electricity reached

Surin. Today foreign tourists visit Surin to see the annual event of elephants playing football with human beings. The result is that the Thai officials and the rich merchants benefit from the development policy and tourism, but the majority are much worse off. Instead of being poor yet contented, many farmers in the area are now landless labourers in the land which was once theirs. They used to go to the forest for food and herbal medicine -now most of the forest has gone. Debt has driven them to drugs, gambling and superstition. They have lost all hope. They sell their children to be child labourers or prostitutes. Yet they are no better off economically or socially.

Luang Po Nan, a local abbot, is an ethnic Khmer. He saw the suffering of the people who had been uprooted from their own culture and spiritual tradition. Being a meditation master and a charismatic leader, he persuaded his people to meditate together. Once they become mindful, with seeds of peace they have gained a sense of cooperation rather than competition. They are loyal to Siam and have lost their sense of inferiority in being ethnic Khmer. They have started farming together and stopped using expensive and harmful chemical fertilizers. They use buffaloes rather than tractors, so there is no need to buy petrol or borrow money to buy expensive machines. They have even started buffalo and rice banks. There is no need to go to money lenders any more. Farming and harvesting have become joyful occasions with traditional songs and dances. They have formed a cooperative movement to help other villages and provinces as well as themselves.

In the early days the government wanted to put Luang Po Nan in jail as he talked about communal farming in his sermons. However, as a famous monk and meditation master, the local authority did not dare to touch him. Now the Sangha (Authority) has given him an ecclesiastical title. Khon Kaen University has given him an honorary doctorate and last year the National Cultural Commission named him an exemplary citizen. Besides, the non-chemical rice produced by his people is now sold directly to a Protestant group in Switzerland. The people themselves have become the community leaders and Laung Po Nan acts as spiritual adviser.

(2) Also in the Northeast, Yasothorn is a new province that used to be part of Ubon. Here the people are mainly ethnic Lao rather than Khmer. Phra Khru Supa is a local abbot who works closely with lay people in Bangkok to persuade them to use traditional medicine for both prevention and cure of illness, and to take personal responsibility for health care. The people around his temple are proud to help him to increase local production of traditional medicines as well as collaborating with the group in Bangkok.

Both Bangkok and Yasothorn have now gone on to produce rice and vegetables without chemical fertilizers. Another group called Greenet is promoting non harmful, organic vegetables to the middle class of Bangkok who are happy to pay a little more than market price for healthy food. This not only helps the farmers in the Northeast, but also conscientizes the Bangkokians to realize that we are all interrelated. We must fight nonviolently together for social justice and a proper natural environment.

Recently a wider movement has been formed called Friends of the People. Membership includes the middle class in the capital as well as all the small farmers' associations in the North, the Northeast and the South of Siam.

(3) The Dewdrop Association, in the South, uses a bottom-up approach to work for the environment and social justice. Mr Chuan Leekpai, the Thai Prime Minister, is from Trang where the project is based; however, he has little knowledge of the positive contribution of

this association. In the last fifteen years the Dewdrop Association has given real hope to the grass roots people in nearby provinces - a hope that had been destroyed in the name of national and economic development.

Also in the South, there is the People's University movement, which links grassroots teachers with monks and Muslim villagers. These examples represent positive trends for the future of Siam. Some of these cases have been beautifully described by Sanidsuda Ekachai in her book, "Seeds of Hope".

As for the monks, they have now formed themselves into a group called Sekhiyadhamma, i.e. how to apply the teachings of Buddhism in the modern world. They preach against fast food, junk food, the use of plastic and foam, chemical fertilizers and modernization or westernization without proper understanding of indigenous cultures and proper respect of the natural environment. Of the 300,000 members of the Thai Sangha, we have a hard core of around 300 in the Sekhiyadhamma group. This organisation produces a quarterly journal of the same name that raises awareness of suffering, the cause of suffering and how to eliminate suffering through the Noble Eightfold Path of nonviolence.

Good friendship or kalayanamitta is very important to this group. The Buddha said we need to have good friends, good companions and good friendships. We can learn from others to develop ourselves and to help our society to be peaceful and just, starting with ourselves. Once we can transform our consciousness to be less selfish, then with help from good friends we can transform our societies to be free from human oppression and exploitation. It may not be easy, but it is possible.

The monks in Sekhiyadhamma are trying. No doubt we need many more good friends to help critically as well as collaboratively, so that, sooner rather than later, we can liberate ourselves and our fellow sufferers.

In Buddhism, one is taught to be aware of the three root causes of suffering: greed, hatred and delusion, which are fundamental blocks to openness, love, compassion and responsibility. As Bhikkhu Bodhi, an American Buddhist monk, has said:

"Desirous attachment sees the other as essentially desirable and seeks to draw him or her into one's possession or sphere of influence. Aversion, on the other hand, sees the other as essentially undesirable or even repulsive, and attempts to remove the person from one's field of contact. Indifference is an attitude in which the other simply does not matter, and his suffering and joys are of absolutely no consequence. In this way our relationships with others are limited to the manipulation of a few individuals who impinge on the domain of our personal concern, and the ignoring of all the many others who fall outside of that domain.

"The dominion of the ego in the emotional sphere appears most conspicuously in the weight of the unwholesome roots - greed, hatred, and delusion - as determinants of conduct. Because the ego is essentially a vacuum, the illusion of egohood generates a nagging sense of insufficiency. We feel oppressed by an aching incompleteness, an inner lack requiring constantly to be filled. The result is greed, a relentless drive to reach out and devour whatever we can - of pleasure, wealth, power, and fame - in a never successful attempt to bring satisfaction. When we meet with frustration we react with hatred, the urge to destroy the obstacle preventing our satisfaction. If the obstructions to our satisfaction prove too powerful for the tactics of aggression, a third strategy will be used: dullness or delusion, an attitude of deliberate unawareness adopted as a shell to hide our vulnerability to pain" (Bhikkhu Bodhi,

"Nourishing the Roots", Kandy, 1978. Wheel No. 259/260)

To be Buddhist can be helpful or harmful; it depends how you understand that term. However, if you want to practice Buddhism seriously, Thich Nhat Hanh advises us to take as the first guideline. "Do not be idolatrous or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, including Buddhist ones. Buddhist systems of thought must be guiding principles and not absolute truths"

There could be various Buddhist approaches to sustainable lifestyles in community. For me, freedom or liberation is basic, but it should not be merely Western liberalism. Bhikkhu Payutto explains that Buddhist freedom is threefold. First, people should enjoy basic freedom from all the fundamental insecurities and dangers that threaten their existence such as poverty or disease; and calamities such as drought or famine. Second is social freedom in being free from human oppression and exploitation. This involves tolerance, friendship and benevolence. The third and last is the freedom of the inner life. This is freedom from mental suffering, from the greed, hatred and delusion that corrupt the mind and cause people to commit all kinds of evils.

To achieve such states, we should utilise traditional training in dana (generosity) sila (moral precepts) and bhavana (meditation or mindfulness). These practices must be done within the modern context. Dana does not mean just giving away what you do not want. It may begin in that way, but ultimately we give what is most dear - our life, our fortune and our fame. From a practical standpoint we should also give our thought and our time to those who really need them most.

By examining the practice of dana one can see that giving is more important than receiving. This is a radical departure from capitalism and consumerism, because giving helps us to restructure our consciousness from selfishness to unselfishness. We should be content with a simple lifestyle, rather than accumulating wealth while others suffer. We should be willing to share our wealth, our talents, our time and our energy with those at the grassroots level. Once we restructure our mind to be more humble, less ambitious and less selfish, we can then start to transform our community to be more just, peaceful, and environmentally conducive to all beings. Such a society would be full of goodness, beauty and truth.

The traditional practice of sila is useful in transforming the self and society. If we place the traditional precepts in a modern context, we see how the transformation can take place. The Five Precepts, which constitute the basic guidelines of sila, entail a commitment to abstain from taking life, taking what has not been given, refraining from sexual misconduct, false speech, and intoxicants that cloud the mind.

If we understand liberation as an impulse which seeks to enhance life in all forms, then the Buddhist concept of ahimsa (non-killing) becomes a precondition for societal liberation and world peace. To generate peace and to bring about liberation requires eliminating, or at least reducing, violence. The problem is that there are several kinds of violence, as Johan Galtung reminds us. The clearest is direct violence as described in the first precept. However, there is also structural violence, violence that kills slowly because it is built into the very fabric of the social structures which creates poverty, ecological imbalance, and death in the sense of a desperately unjust social structure that kills by giving much to the few and very little to the many. Is not this form of violence also included in the Five Precepts?

The second precept, abstaining from taking what does not belong to one, seems relevant here.

Most of us are not involved in stealing. Yet something is taken, though there may not be an awareness of a theft having taken place. A landowner has land, but the landless have only the opportunity to work the land. The landowner says, "You may till my land, but you must give me seventy percent of the harvest" (a figure fairly typical in most Southeast Asian countries). The landowner may feel he is being generous, since the alternative is to use a tractor, or he can sell the land as a golf course. The landless may also feel grateful, for the alternative may be starvation. Yet one can easily see that there is something morally wrong in this arrangement. To maintain such an oppressive structure, something else is needed, such as keeping the peasants isolated so that they cannot organise a revolt, or giving them an ideology or religious system that supports the existing structure.

A third type of violence, cultural violence, can be seen as any element in a culture, particularly a religion or ideology, that legitimizes direct and/or structural violence. Again, Buddhism has much to contribute here. Of course, there are Buddhists, past, present, and future, who commit direct violence and participate in structural violence. They will not, however, find any support within the Buddhist scriptures. To claim such support would be a violation of the fourth precept against false speech. Although that precept is more concerned with conventional lying rather than in legitimizing violence, if Buddhism is invoked in defense of violence, then that constitutes an act of lying.

From the above discussion one can conclude that Buddhism is a very strong ethical system supportive of peace. Its precepts against violence represent a liberative impulse. However there is a weakness. One may have a personal commitment against violence while at the same time remaining silent towards evil in society. The larger a social structure is, such as a nation-state or large corporation, or the merging of the two, and the more we become accustomed to it, the more violent it can become. Can Buddhists remain silent when the government continues to increase the national arms budget at the expense of basic health and education? Can a Buddhist keep silent when a multinational oil company constructs a gas pipeline in Burma at the expense of Burmese human rights and when the pipeline would destroy the Thai forest? Some might argue that these issues are political rather than moral; they are both. The major question is exactly how the ethical inspiration of Buddhism can enlighten politics by being courageous enough to question such social structures, not merely the individual acts of people or their governments. If Buddhists understand structural violence and its roots in hatred (*dosa*), and learn how to eliminate it mindfully and non-violently, then Buddhism will not only become relevant to the modern world but also be a source of its liberation. Similarly, consumerism is linked directly and indirectly to greed (*lobha*) and lust (*raga*). One can see this clearly in advertisements which exploit women's bodies to seduce would-be buyers, artificially creating needs for certain products.

Modern education deals almost exclusively with the minds, not the hearts, of students. The most able are recognised and rewarded materially and financially, although they need not be >good' or aware of societal ills. Many of the rich and powerful are unhappy. Directly or indirectly, their exalted positions rest on mass poverty and ecological destruction. This is indeed ignorance (*avijja*) or delusion (*moha*). If Buddhists are to make a meaningful contribution to liberating the modern world from violence and oppression, they must confront the three root causes of evil - greed, hatred and delusion, both individually, as well as in society. All practicing Buddhists must develop right mindfulness. We must heighten our awareness of our limitations and restructure our selfish nature to become increasingly selfless. Moreover, we must create an inner peace along with an understanding of social realities and structural violence as a prerequisite for both individual and collective liberation. Full liberation is both individual and societal.

In order to build inner peace along with an understanding of social reality, one uses bhavana or meditation, whose meaning might best be defined as 'cultivation' or 'self-training'. It does not mean merely sitting in solitude and engaging in some special form of internal contemplation, which is the image the word 'meditation' generally evokes in English. Bhavana means investigating, reflecting, learning, training or nourishing the mind, in order to develop oneself towards enlightenment. Bhavana is thus the practice of mindful, daily living. One can practice this at every moment of one's life: when drinking tea, washing the dishes, gardening, or driving a car. Once one practices like this, one has peace and happiness inside that can be shared with others.

Traditionally the first part of training the mind is to achieve tranquility (samatha), to plant seeds of peace within. The second comprises the technique for understanding the true nature of one's psycho-physical constitution, and of the world. This is called vipassana or insight meditation, which can be developed into analytical thinking by way of seeing into casual relations or by the way of problem-solving. It becomes an internal factor for wisdom or right understanding with the detachment of the ego. In Pali this is called yonisomanasikara, critical self-awareness, which leads to selflessness. Maintaining yonisomanasikara helps one to be earnest. It helps generate energetic effort and it helps reduce selfish desire. It will produce the right view towards detachment.

The Buddha said that the most important requirement for true understanding of the self is to be calm in order to develop self-cultivation and self-criticism. Yet understanding is different from intellectual knowledge, since it comes from both the heart and the mind. It helps one to be aware, to be humble, to know one's limits. At the same time, it promotes loving-kindness and compassion which enables us to share suffering with others and to eliminate the cause of suffering. Of course, when one tackles the cause of suffering, especially within an oppressive social system, one usually gets hurt. Here bhavana again helps one to understand such danger and to forgive those who do harm. If one can be aware of one's anger, then one can surround it with mindfulness, transforming anger into compassion. Thich Nhat Hanh says that anger is like a closed flower; the flower will bloom only when the sunlight penetrates deeply into the flower. Bhavana is like the sunlight. If one keeps breathing and concentrating, mindfulness will transform the anger. When sunshine penetrates a flower, the flower cannot resist. It has to open itself and show its heart to the sun. If one keeps focussing on one's anger, shining one's compassion and understanding onto it, then that anger will soon crack and one will be able to look into its depths and see its roots.

In the face of greed, lust or delusion, Bhavana is also a powerful tool to work against capitalism, consumerism, sexism, militarism and the like. Self-awareness can also be used to criticise our own society, nation-state, culture and even our own Buddhist tradition. With this attitude, one will not hate the oppressors, the capitalists or the dictators, but will utilise one's understanding to destroy the oppressive system.

Again, Thich Nhat Hanh helps us in this context. He says, "In the Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra, there's a term that can be translated as "interbeing". Interbeing means that you cannot be a separate entity. You can only interbe with other people and elements. Interbeing is a good word. It might signify your true self. It is the awareness that you are made wholly of non-self elements. This insight is very important in the practice of psychotherapy. When a child has a problem and you treat the entire family, not just the child, you are applying the principle of non-self. The family members are not the child, but they cannot be separated from the child's problem. In order to help the child, the family must also be involved in the therapy.

"When one looks at a flower deeply enough, non-flower elements are seen in it, such as sunshine. Sunshine is not a flower, but you cannot have a flower without it. Another non-flower element is garbage. Those who do not practice meditation may look at the flower and not see the garbage; however after five or seven days, they'll see that the flower dies and becomes garbage. But those who truly see the nature of things do not need to wait, for they see it right away. When we look at garbage, we also see the non-garbage elements; we see the flower there. Good organic gardeners see that even if they don't practice meditation. When they look at a garbage heap, they see cucumbers and lettuce. That is why they do not throw garbage away; they keep garbage in order to transform it back into cucumbers and lettuce. If a flower can become garbage, then garbage can become flowers. This is the most important Buddhist teaching on non-duality. The flower does not consider garbage an enemy, or panic when becoming garbage, nor does the garbage become depressed and view the flower as an enemy. They realize the nature of interbeing. In Buddhist therapy, we preserve the garbage within ourselves. We don't want to throw it out, because if we do, we have nothing left with which to make our flowers grow". ("Radical Conservatism", TICD Bangkok, 1990, pp. 53-54)

With such awareness, one can see how consumerism operates as a secular religion, promising happiness in the world. As an English Buddhist puts it:

"By participating in the sacrament of (luxury) purchase, sacrificing money, we buy more than an object. We also buy an image located within a system of images which we hold sacred. Purchase gives us a place within that system. When we buy a car we seek to acquire the power, prestige, sexuality, success, which the advertisements have succeeded in identifying with the car, or whatever the commodity is. Consumerism works by identifying the sense of unsatisfactoriness or lack (dukkha) we all hold at a deep level of mind with a particular "lack", and then producing an object guaranteed to satisfy that "need", resolve dukkha, provide happiness" (David Arnett's "The Individual and Society" in "Buddhist Perception for Desirable Societies in the Future", TICD, Bangkok 1993)

As 'interbeing' we need others as good friends - kalayanamitta, because we cannot exist alone. The Buddha said that kalayanamitta is, externally, the most important element for everyone. We need good friends, good company and friendship. From others one can learn to develop oneself and help society to be peaceful and just.

Another good friend, Maurice Ash, has just started the first Buddhist College in England. In his latest essay to mark his 80th birthday anniversary, he reminds us that "Far from accepting the world as it is, we have a commitment to reducing the scale on which society operates, to a scale on which morality can indeed be lived". He also says that Holistic thought ... being on the scale of our activities... points to the primacy of the local.

His essay has an appropriate title, which I would like to use to end my talk: "Beyond The Age of Metaphysics and the Restoration of Local Life". To sustain lifestyle in community, we must have good friends who care for the right scale, who understand that small is beautiful, stressing decentralization, local self reliance and real participation of all, rather than the centralization of national government and multinational corporations with hierarchical systems which lead to monoculture.