

# GLOBAL RECOVERY – A BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE by

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I wish to pay my deep respect to the Supreme Sangha Council of Thailand and my admiration to the Royal Thai Government for the blessings they have given to hold the 7<sup>th</sup> UN Day Vesak Celebrations in Thailand, as they have on five previous occasions. I also sincerely thank the organizers, namely, *Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University of Thailand and Inner Trip Reiyukai International of Japan* for inviting me to give a keynote address at this auspicious event on the theme: **Global Recovery – A Buddhist Perspective.**

We as Buddhists of the world, in my opinion, have a greater responsibility at this time towards the survival of life on this planet than followers of any other faith. In the Teachings of the Buddha, for example, as taught in the Kalama Sutta, we are not expected to accept anyone or anything as an authority. It is a fundamental practice in Buddhism to inquire into the working of our own mind through investigation and questioning, and resolving problems by appropriate actions in our world. We ourselves are the ultimate authority when it comes to the acceptance or rejection of any thing. Therefore, as human beings we have first to find out what has gone wrong in the world before we can look for correctives which we ourselves can implement without beseeching an external authority to intervene. The responsibility of a global recovery is entirely in our hands.

The Buddha placed before us two conceptions of the world namely, “An external objective world” and “an internal personal world.” We have to understand the

objective world in the context of the universe which is in a vast cosmic space. The Buddha discouraged cosmic speculations, as such speculations have no existential relevance for us. He emphasized the importance of our understanding the “inner personal world” which is created by us, ourselves. In Buddha’s words “I do proclaim that in this very fathom-long body, with its Perceptions and Consciousness, is the world, the arising of the world, the cessation of the world and the path leading to the cessation of the world”

As far as the external world is concerned the Buddha referred in some detail to the vastness of cosmic space and the innumerable number of worlds located therein. These galactic systems are continuously undergoing change both internally and externally. Several discourses (suttas) delivered by the Buddha, especially *Agganna Sutta*, vividly explained the processes of the origin, the dissolution and the reappearance of the world and life on this planet. He cautioned us not to attempt to go into too detailed a study of these numerous world systems or galaxies as these are endless and cannot be comprehended by the worldly human mind.

However, a basic understanding of the external world is indispensable for our existential purposes as that influences the environment in which we live. We Buddhists believe in three factors that influence our personality as mentioned in the *Maha Mangala Sutta*. -“ *Pathirupa Desa Vasoca – Pubbeta kaca Punnata, Atta Samma Panidica*” -These are the Environment in which we live, our past Karmas and the degree to which we can bring our own minds under control. These are three among the thirty eight auspicious factors mentioned by the Buddha in this *Sutta*.

Detailed studies of the external universe do not contribute to reduce our suffering in this cycle of births and deaths in which we are caught. Therefore, it is more important to understand and cross this *sansaric* ocean – the cycle of births and deaths. That is why rather than becoming overly involved in the teaching of external sciences such as astronomy and astrophysics or biochemistry and such

other physical sciences the Buddha concentrated on the subject of helping us to understand the internal science of our own mind. The Buddha discovered the Four Noble Truths and advocated us to follow the Noble Eightfold Path and related moral codes of discipline. However, Buddha's teachings provide very worthy lessons of human conduct to maintain the health of our planet which is indispensable for our very existence.

Now the question before us is what has gone wrong in this 'external world' which make us suffer more than before and what are the factors that cause this continuous degeneration and finally what we can do in our 'personal world' to reverse this process. From a Buddhist perspective global recovery has to begin with oneself. Collectively speaking we have to begin with ourselves as families, groups, rural villages, urban communities, nations and as the world community or the human family.

When we look for the causal factors that led to the present degeneration in our world we have always to keep in mind that, in the same way we are all interconnected and interdependent from the human personality to the global human family, all these causal factors are also interconnected. This is what is taught by the Buddha in the Discourse on Dependent Origination or *Paticcasamuppada Dhamma*. Therefore when looking for corrective measures we have to pay attention not only to the individual factors but to the totality of the causal factors and devise ways and means to deal with them as a whole.

In daily Buddhist practice we cultivate the thought 'May all sentient beings be well and happy'- in Pali language "*Sabbe Satta Bhavantu Sukkhithaththa.*" So looking at things, life and the world holistically -sabbe-is what we are used to as Buddhists.

**Today the world is faced with numerous global problems. Poverty, Disease, Environmental Pollution, Climate Change, Violence and Crimes, Drug Addiction,**

**Women and Child Abuse, Corruption, Wars and Terrorism and Powerlessness that comes out of Violation of Human Rights, are some of these. All of these and their causes are interrelated. All these problems can be traced to the lapses in human conduct.**

Most people I talked to expressed the view that poverty is the number one problem that humanity is faced with. But very few recognized the relationship that poverty has to other factors like affluent life styles of a few in the world who grab for themselves an unfair quota of the world's resources , powerlessness of the poor, economic exploitation and the resultant vicious circle consisting of ignorance, illiteracy, disease, divisiveness, violence, drug addiction and so on. So any portfolio for the eradication of poverty has to take into consideration all these factors

As Buddhists we cannot advocate or apply violent means for removing the causes that bring about poverty. So non-violent means have to be found and used to combat poverty and the other problems related to it. This implies that the spiritual life of the community has to be uplifted. In all countries there are spiritual traditions that can be regenerated to bring members of the community in a spirit of togetherness, to promote loving kindness and to develop self-reliance. Together they can first discuss and learn the causes that keep them in poverty and then formulate the kinds of actions they can undertake to bring about change. All this starts with the simple practice of *Anapanasati* ( Mindful Breathing ) and watching one's own mind.

In Sri Lanka a highly successful integrated rural awakening movement, at the core of which is poverty eradication, has been going on for the past 52 years. The movement known as Sarvodaya – to Awaken All – has its presence in over 15,000 village communities in Sri Lanka belonging to all ethnic and religious communities in the country. The fact that Sarvodaya is based on the Buddhist principles of Non-violence has not adversely affected people from non-Buddhist communities such as Hindu, Muslim and Christian from joining. The

essence of religion is its potential to awaken the spiritual energy in man. Once this energy is released man-made barriers melt away and transformation of community consciousness occurs.

The Buddhist values which are willingly accepted by non-Buddhists in this community organization strategy can be summarized as follows:

*Metta* (Loving Kindness), *Karuna* (Compassionate Actions), *Mudhita* (Dispassionate Joy), *Upekkha* (Equanimity), *Dana* (Sharing), *Priya Vacana* (Pleasant Language), *Arthacarya* (Constructive Actions) and *Samanathmatha* (Equality).

The Community begins to accept poverty and its related causal factors as a challenge they can successfully face and surmount with self reliance, community participation and a scientific approach. This is how science can be utilized in influence the environment we live in – a practical way. They harness their traditional values, skills and technologies, natural and human resources to satisfy their Basic Human Needs such as water, food, clothing, shelter, health care, energy, education, communication, spiritual, cultural and environmental needs. Thus from grassroots up a people's power constructively and non-violently transform the poor communities can be successfully developed globally in accordance with the Buddhist Way.

From a Buddhist perspective transformation of the consciousness should also take place in the affluent and powerful sector of the community.. The principles enunciated above are equally beneficial to them to awaken their human personalities and to bring security and joy of living to their families. If they too join the efforts of the community by sharing a part of their excess land-holdings with the landless, make material and monetary donations or professional services for their educational, health, housing and cultural programs and so on then the disparities that lead to

jealousies, rivalries, class conflicts, violence, terrorism and thefts may be mitigated.

The rich and the privileged can also subscribe substantially to train young people for gainful employment in the community. Without having maximization of profit as the sole objective they can start agricultural and small scale industrial enterprises at the community level to absorb youth to build new economic relationships. They can greatly assist to create a new generation of young entrepreneurs who respect nature, environment and humanity. When they are thus gainfully employed the village or urban community can never become a breeding ground for lawless elements, drug traffickers, drug addicts or alcoholics and later on as HIV/AIDS victims.

While charity is a good thing and we should promote charitable deeds, we must not forget the fact charity cannot be a substitute for justice. Furthermore indiscriminate charity breeds beggars. So people who possess immense wealth and control the global financial economies must undergo a revolutionary change in their consciousness and give leadership for a sustainable global economic transformation which works for all. If they fail in their universal duty at this time, as well illustrated by the Buddha in his numerous teachings such as those contained in *Chakkawatta Sihanada Sutta*, *Agganna Sutta* and *Kutadhantha Sutta*, they will have to bear the major responsibility for multiplying terrorism, accelerating environmental hazards and ecological imbalances to uncontrollable global proportions.

It is a well known fact that national and multinational corporations wield great influence over governments. Therefore these corporations have a great responsibility, some times greater than the governments, for the survival of our planet and all forms of life including humans on it. Some of the most educated and capable brains on this planet are employed by them. Only if there is a shift in the consciousness of the controllers of these multinational corporations and governments perhaps most of the global problems we referred to can be tackled

successfully. Is there a way that Buddhism can influence that process ?

Transforming the consciousness of those who control the economy may not be that difficult to be achieved if we in those Asian countries like Japan, Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, Vietnam and Sri Lanka, where majority of people are practicing Buddhists, make a singular effort to combat these problems at community level by transforming the rural and urban communities in an integrated way. By simultaneous transformation of their consciousness, the economy and political power relationships communities can be made to bear the total responsibility for maintaining law and order, peace, carrying out community development programs and for implementing a participatory form of self governance. This will be an example to those that have a global influence such as the proprietors of multinational corporations and rich people within our societies. There is no need to confront them in violent ways, verbally or otherwise. After all every human being is subject to the Law of Suffering, as Buddha taught us. However much rich or powerful one may be, he or she cannot escape from physical, mental and emotional suffering. The way to overcome suffering and achieve lasting happiness is to follow the spiritual path shown to us by the Buddha.

The Buddha advised the seekers after lasting Happiness (*Nibbana*) or Supreme Enlightenment to diligently strive to understand the three cardinal laws Impermanence (*Anicca*), Unsatisfactoriness [*Dukkha*] and Egolessness (*Anatta*) to which we all are subject to. When in thousands of rural and urban communities, people learn this Dhamma and practice the three virtues of *Sila* (Morality) and *Samadhi* ( Concentration ) and develop *Panna* (Wisdom) the influence it will have on society could be extraordinary. This will create an enormous spiritual energy that will transform many rich and powerful leaders to follow the path of the Dhamma – the Noble Eight fold Path.

The last but not the least important problem that concerns us is the increasing organized violence in the world. When democratically elected governments and law abiding citizens are threatened, tortured and killed by terrorist groups governments are also forced to allocate more of their resources to counteract them by greater violence. Occasionally governments can succeed in defeating terrorists as in my country, Sri Lanka, but at great human cost. The roots of terrorism and war cannot be easily destroyed. As the Buddha says "Hatred does not cease by hatred. It is by non-hatred that it can be removed." It is only by allocation of more and more resources to spiritual moral and cultural development of the people while improvements to social economic and political rights are also ensured that people can be led to the path of non-violence. Human rights violations especially to women and children must be totally stopped if we are to sustain a civilized level of human society.

In recent years human societies have experienced great loss of human lives and properties from Earthquakes, Tsunamis, Floods, Hurricanes, Tornados, Eruption of volcanoes and such other natural disasters. Similarly large scale human sufferings have been brought about by deadly diseases such as HIV/AIDS, cancer and heart diseases. In Buddhist societies there is a general belief that when rulers in a society are not righteous, they disobey or violate *Niyama* Dhammas ( Cosmic Laws ), namely, Laws of Nature such as those pertaining to *Bija* ( Genes ), *Utu* ( Seasons ), *Kamma* ( Cause and Effect ), *Citta* ( Mind ) and *Dhamma* ( Phenomena ), and when there is no good governance nature revolts and brings destruction to those societies. Aren't there signs that this revolt on the part of Nature is taking global proportions and therefore shouldn't the whole of humanity rally round to save our planet, our nature, our human society and values ? The Buddha showed us the way 2600 years ago.

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Sri Lanka. The Movement which started 52 years ago is now actively engaged in Community Self Development programs in 15,000 village communities in Sri Lanka. This Movement has inspired many development thinkers both in the East and the West. Most scholars describe this

Movement as Buddhist philosophy translated into Welfare, Development and Peace action.