

Global problem-solving: A Buddhist perspective

By Sulak Sivaraksa

Sulak Sivaraksa of Bangkok, Thailand is probably that country's most prominent social critic and activist, and one of the major contemporary exponents of socially engaged Buddhism. Now sixty years old, he has for the last 30 years combined provocative intellectual work with continual grassroots organizing in Thailand. He has founded rural development projects as well as many non-governmental organizations dedicated to exploring, in Thailand and internationally, alternative models of sustainable, traditionally-rooted, and ethically - and spiritually-based development.



To be honest and to begin by getting right to the point, I must state plainly that there is no serious contemporary Buddhist perspective for global problem-solving.

Although the World Conference on Religion and Peace, with its head offices in Geneva and New York, has strong Buddhist financial support, especially from the Rishokoseikei in Japan, this body passes resolutions on global matters without doing anything significant from a Buddhist perspective. Indeed, contemporary Buddhists seem to be interested only at national, local, or denominational levels.

It is gratifying to learn then that the Asian Buddhist Conference for Peace is organizing a fourth International Seminar on Buddhism and Leadership for Peace.

Efforts by the United Nations University

Other organizations, as well as the ABCP, have attempted to promote the development of a Buddhist approach to global problem-solving. For example, the United Nations University is currently supporting a sub-project on Buddhist Perceptions of Desirable Societies in the Future.

At a meeting in Bangkok in 1986, a number of leading scholars and practicing Buddhists came together to examine how religious thinkers and activists perceive the current human predicament. The framework of the meeting was divided into three main parts: 1) a diagnosis of current problems, 2) an examination of specifically Buddhist responses to these problems, and 3) a projection of how it might be possible to progress from the contemporary situation towards a more desirable society.

At the meeting apathy, confusion and selfishness were identified as the main causes of the hopelessness that engulfs so many of the world's people, although these were not explicitly related to religion. At one point, the slogan of the French revolution, "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity," was discussed. Why did the Buddha not preach these values, rather than the Four Noble Truths — the existence of suffering, the causes of suffering, the cessation of suffering and the Noble Eightfold Path leading to the cessation of suffering?

The three values of the French Revolution are idealistic. The Buddha taught people to come to terms with, and surmount, the reality of human existence — the unavoidable problems of pain, loss, suffering, sickness and death. This approach was felt by many at the meeting in Bangkok to have a great deal to offer those engaged in solving contemporary global problems.

After the Bangkok meeting, the United Nations University set up a subcommittee which identified ten relevant issues to be tackled by Buddhists in order to move towards a more desirable future society. They were: the individual and society in Buddhism; universalism and particularism; existing social practices which may lead to a more ideal society; sangha, state and people; Buddhism and the evolution of society; Buddhist eschatology, millennialism and the Buddha land; Buddhist education; Buddhist approaches to war and violence; science, technology and Buddhism; and women and family in Buddhism. Hopefully, the United Nations University will publish the relevant articles on these topics.

Recently, the United Nations University called for yet another meeting in Bangkok on the same theme of perceptions of desirable societies, but this time with respect to different religious and ethical systems. The conclusions were as follows:

We have reviewed briefly the position of different religious currents in terms of their beliefs and values regarding:

- Welfare and development,
- Justice, equity and human rights,
- Peace, reconciliation and nonviolence, and
- Identity, authenticity and universality.

It is important to realize that many of the divergencies existing among religions are often complementary visions, which should not be seen as conflictual, but rather as differences which lead to deeper and more universal positions through a process of dialogue. It is crucial then that this process is guaranteed to take place by the religions, their institutions, and by society and the state.

These divergencies do not necessarily represent different religious beliefs but rather the positions of the religious thinkers or activists who choose either to be part of society, to accept its fundamental dynamics in order to transform it from within, or to stand outside it to develop a transcendental critical view of its values and institutions.

I feel that the United Nations University's efforts are relevant to the theme of our international seminar.

The Myth of Cakkravartin and Present-day Global Problem-Solving

Unlike Muslims and Christians, contemporary Buddhists have no vision for global problem-solving. This is partly due to the fact that prior to western colonial expansion in the last century, Buddhism was divided into many schools, all of which were attached to national cultures and/or nation-states, each with subdivisions into various denominations or sects. Western Christianity, on the other hand, especially with its ties to the building of great empires such as the Roman and British empires, has evolved such that the white men's burden includes caring for the world as a universality or Catholicism. Although Protestantism was divided very much like Buddhism, it managed to pull together, with all its differences, to work on global issues, especially since the creation of the World Council of Churches.

The spread of Islam increased side by side with Arab commercial success and the advancement of scientific knowledge, especially after the collapse of ancient Greek civilization. Although the Europeans replaced the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century, the rise of nationalism, pan-nationalism and economic success in the Middle East encouraged Muslims to have a more global outlook.

Although former Buddhist kingdoms in South and Southeast Asia have regained their independence from the west, they have lost the Dhammic essence of their national identities. They have retained only state ceremonies which are often more feudal than Buddhist. They blindly adhere to outmoded customs which are irrelevant to contemporary society.

Despite the fact that Siam was not subjugated politically, she was colonized intellectually, culturally and educationally. The effects of this type of colonization are almost impossible to reverse.

In East Asia, Buddhism lost much of its true essence to Confucianism or Shintoism, even before the arrival of western influences.

The lofty Buddhist spirit remains in Asia only in small pockets for individual or local development where human needs are placed ahead of material or economic gains. At the national level, most people think only in terms of economic development. Hence, the rich get richer and the poor remain so, or become poorer. This is true for nations and individuals. And of course, no one is happy. The present social development systems lead to human rights abuses, a widening gap between the rich and the poor, environmental degradation and the aggressive destruction of natural resources. Unfortunately, it seems that Buddhist development models have not been established and, overall, responses from the Buddhist communities have been insufficient to counter these negative elements.

Before attempting to deal with the above-mentioned issues, we ought to look into our Buddhist traditions to see whether such a global concern for social justice existed in the past, in order to apply it meaningfully in the present and in the future.

In my opinion, it is very worthwhile to examine the Buddhist mythological tradition regarding kingship and the universal monarch who ruled for the well-being of all. How the myth was applied by Buddhist rulers of later generations is also interesting.

The Aggana Sutta of the Digha Nikaya begins by portraying an ideal world of natural effortless existence. Ethereal, self-luminescent beings live in bliss and know no discrimination between polar opposites such as male and female, good and evil, rich and poor, ruler and subject. The earth itself is made of a delightful soft edible substance that looks like butter and is as sweet as honey.

Gradually, however, because of karma remaining from a previous world cycle, this Golden Age comes to an end. During a long period of decline manifest in the world and its beings, greed, grasping, sex, theft, violence and murder are introduced. Finally, sheer anarchy prevails, and in order to put an end to it, the beings get together to select from among their ranks a king to rule over them and maintain order. This is the Mahasommata, the Great Elect, and in return for fulfilling his functions as a monarch, the beings each agree to pay him a portion of their rice.

Such is the myth of the first kingship. The record also relates the legend of the Cakkravartin, (wheel-turning emperor), or universal monarch. A basic version of this appears in the Cakkravatti Sihandada Sutta, also of the Digha Nikaya.

This text, too, begins with a description of a Golden Age, the starting point of the world cycle. During this time, beings had beautiful bodies, life-spans of eighty thousand years, and wonderful effortless existences. This time, however, the Cakkravartin, Dalhanemi by name, is present from the beginning. He is, in fact, very much a part of the Golden Age for his presence is instrumental in maintaining the paradisiacal state. Because he knows what is good and rules through Dhamma, poverty, ill-will, violence, and wrongdoings do not exist in his domain.

Traditionally the Cakkravartin is portrayed as an extraordinary being. He is said to exhibit the thirty-two bodily marks of a Great Man (Mahapurusa) and to be endowed with the seven jewels, or emblems of sovereignty, the most important of which is the wheel (cakka). In the Sutta, this magnificent wheel appears in midair before Dalhanemi at the beginning of his reign as a sign of his righteousness. It then leads him in a great cosmic conquest of the four continents.

It takes him East, South, West and North as far as the great oceans, and, where the wheel rolls, he encounters no resistance. The power of his Dhamma, symbolized by his wheel, the Dhammacakka, is such that local kings immediately submit to him. Finally his wheel leads him back to his capital at the center of the world, and there it remains, miraculously suspended in midair over the royal palaces, as an emblem of sovereignty. After many years of reigning in peace over a contented and prosperous empire, however, Dalhanemi's wheel of Dhamma begins to sink. This is a sign of the approaching end of his reign, according to the Buddhist law of change (anicca), and when the wheel disappears altogether into the earth, the wise king entrusts his throne to his son and retires from this world to live as an ascetic in the forest.

It is important to note that the wheel of Dhamma is not automatically passed on from one Cakkravartin to the next. Dalhanemi's son must, in turn, prove worthy of his own wheel by calling it forth with his own righteousness. This fact sets the scene for the rest of the myth, which, like the story in the previous Sutta, traces the gradual degradation of this world and the beings in it.

After a long succession of Dalhanemi's descendants who are perfect Cakkravartins, there comes a king who fails to follow Dhamma, and for whom the wheel does not appear. Consequently, there is resistance to his rule. Friction develops; the people fail to prosper; the universal monarch fails to support them; and one thing leads to another, as it is stated in the Sutta: "From not giving to the destitute, poverty grew rife; from poverty growing rife, stealing increased; from the spread of stealing, violence grew apace; from the growth of violence, the destruction of life became common; from the frequency of murder, both the life span of the beings and their beauty wasted away."

The myth then goes on to trace the further decline in the quality and span of life, until a state of virtual anarchy is reached. In this respect, then, the myth of the Cakkravartin is quite similar to that of the Great Elect (Mahasommata).

Contrasting the two Suttas, one can draw different conclusions. In the former, the Great Elect is called upon only when the need for him arises. He functions as a stopgap against further anarchy, but the Golden Age itself requires and knows no king at all. In the latter, on the other hand, the ruler is a crucial part of the Golden Age. By his very presence and by his proper rule, he ensures a peaceful, prosperous, idyllic existence for all, and he will continue to do so as long as he is righteous enough to merit the wheel of Dhamma, that is, as long as he truly is a wheel-turning Cakkravartin. The conclusion one can draw from these two myths is that neither myth stops at the Golden Age, but each goes on to describe in no uncertain terms what happens when a ruler does not live up to the ideal.

The suggestion is made, therefore, that there are really two possible types of rulers. One, a full-fledged Cakkravartin, is righteous and rules according to Dhamma, and so like Dalhanemi, ensures a Golden Age. Indeed there is a saying by the Buddha, in the Anguttara Nikaya stating that "A universal monarch, a righteous and just king relies on the Dhamma. Respecting, revering and honouring the Dhamma, with the Dhamma as his standard, he provides for the proper welfare and protection of his people." The other, perhaps not truly worthy of the title Cakkravartin, is not so righteous, fails to rule according to the Dhamma, and is responsible for a cosmic catastrophe, the degradation of the world.

These two myths have greatly influenced Buddhist monarchs in South and Southeast Asia. However, in history, Emperor Ashoka of ancient India was perhaps the only one who could really be called a Cakkravartin, if one is to accept the prevailing world view. He was the "universal monarch" who reigned as righteously as possible by extending his empire across almost all of the subcontinent.

The Sinhalese, Burmese and Siamese kings were not, in fact, Cakkravartins, but they all wished to imitate the Great Emperor, and tried their best, at least in theory, to be just and righteous. In practice, however, it is questionable whether they actually "respected, revered and honoured the Dhamma, while using the Dhamma as a standard, as a sign, as a sovereign, providing for the proper welfare and protection of the people."

The Role of the Sangha

The result was that the institution or the Sangha, the holy community of brothers and sisters, was developed to teach Dhamma to the rulers and to facilitate communication between the rulers and the ruled.

Unlike the lay community, the Sangha reverses the process of degeneration of the human race described in the Buddhist creation myths: coercion is replaced by cooperation, private property by propertylessness, family and home by the community of androgynous wanderers, and hierarchy by egalitarian democracy. The Sangha symbolizes the unification of means and ends in Buddhist philosophy. That is, the movement working for the resolution of conflict must embody a sane and peaceful process itself. The discipline of the early monastic Sangha was designed to channel expected conflicts of interest among the monks and nuns into processes of peaceful democratic resolution. In order to spread peace and stability in their societies, the monastic Sangha sought to establish moral hegemony over the state, to guide their societies with a code of nonviolent ethics in the interest of social welfare.

Since the passing away of the Buddha, some 2530 years ago, the historical Sangha, however, has been divided vertically and horizontally by cultural, economic and political alliances. Sectors of the

Sangha in many different countries became dependent on state patronage for their growing communities. With the growth of monastic wealth and land-holding came the integration of the Sangha into society as a priest-class of teachers, ritual performers, and chanters of magic formulas — a sector of the landowning elite with its own selfish interests and tremendous cultural power.

With centralization and hierarchization of the Sangha came increasing elite and state control, so that instead of applying the ethics of nonviolence to the state, a part of the Sangha was increasingly called upon to rationalize violence and injustice.

On the other hand, at the base of society, frequently impoverished and poorly educated, there have always been propertyless and familyless radical clergy who maintain the critical perspective of the Buddha. To this day, scattered communities of Buddhists continue in a radical disregard, and sometimes fiery condemnation of the official "state Buddhisms" with their elite hierarchical structures and their legacies of secular accommodation and corruption.

In looking to the future of humankind, it is therefore necessary to look back. The state and its elites, with their natural tendency towards acquisitive conflict, should remain under the hegemony of the popular institutions that embody the process of nonviolent and democratic conflict resolution. In traditional Buddhist terms, the king should always be under the influence of the Sangha, and not vice versa.

For those of us who are lay intellectuals, I feel it is imperative that we support the radical clergy to maintain this critical perspective of the Buddha. We should wholeheartedly support the Sangha in its efforts to lead the local communities towards self-reliance and away from domination by the elites and consumerism.

Indeed many of the local and agrarian societies still have nonviolent means of livelihood, and respect for each individual as well as for animals, trees, rivers and mountains.

Although the government and multinational corporations have introduced various technological "advances" and chemical fertilizers and have advertised to make villagers turn away from their traditional ways of life and opt for jeans, Coca-Cola and fast food as well as worship of the state and its warlike apparatus, their efforts have been successfully countered by those of the critical Sangha. Some of them have even reintroduced meditation practices for farmers, established rice banks and buffalo banks which are owned by the communities and benefit them, rather than the commercial banks which link with international enterprises at the expense of the local population.

The Importance of Socially Engaged Spirituality

We should strengthen and extend the liberation potential within the Buddhist tradition to allow each local community to gain a global perspective making each aware of global problems, especially the suffering of the poor. If more people were conscious of the problem, it could be solved more efficiently.

We should also promote exchange and learning between Buddhists and non-Buddhists in order that they can cooperate meaningfully in a common struggle against the oppressive social forces that cause suffering.

We should also try to enable peasants, fishermen, industrial workers, women and all oppressed factions in any country to discover their faith and the roots of their culture and draw inspiration and sustenance from them.

Unfortunately, development in the past has ignored this vital source of human values. Indeed, activists, even those of agnostic tendency, should be open to the liberating dimensions of religions and cultures. Of course, many activists are anti-religious; perhaps against certain dogmas, forms, ceremonies or establishments; however, perhaps Buddhism, with a small "b" could help them to discover, develop and strengthen a secular spirituality of struggle that does not make overt references to one specific tradition, but nourishes him or her for greater authenticity.

For many of us who want to solve global problems there is the prevalent social engineering mentality which assumes that personal virtue can be more or less conditioned by a radical restructuring of society. On the other hand the opposite view is that radical social improvement is wholly dependent upon personal and spiritual change and changes in lifestyle. But a growing number of spiritually-minded people recognize that the "inner" work is massively discouraged by the social conditions which are the consequence of individual delusion and fear. Thus, an American Zen Buddhist poet and activist, Gary Snyder, remarks that the so called "free world" has become economically dependent on a fantastic system of greed that cannot be fulfilled, sexual desire which cannot be satiated, and a hate which has no outlet, except against oneself. Under these conditions, the odds are heavily against a spiritual lifestyle, especially when one lives in an affluent society in the west. Yet the so called "socialist societies" have, almost without exception, wanted to join the so called "free world." This vicious circle must be broken socially as well as personally — a socially engaged spirituality is needed.

Social activism in the past has been mostly preoccupied with what is "out there." Opening up to what is "in here" and sharing it with others can bring great relief, but it also brings a disconcerting awareness of how much "I" need my busyness, our certainties or rationalizations and their malevolence. Just to maintain awareness of the boredom, frustration, indifference, anger, hostility, and triumph experienced by the activist without being carried away or cast down is an invaluable spiritual practice. But this is only possible if there is an adequate balance of daily meditation and periodic retreat, and also if there is awareness of social ills outside ourselves. These practices slowly dissolve the self-need that feeds on hope, setting us free to do just what the situation demands of us.

Through deepening awareness comes acceptance, and through acceptance comes a seemingly miraculous generosity of spirit and empowerment for the work that compassion requires of us. We can even take ourselves less seriously. With this critical self-awareness, we can genuinely understand and respect others of diverse religions and beliefs. We can even join hands with them humbly and knowingly in trying to develop our spaceship earth to be peaceful and with justice.

A New Interpretation of the Buddhist Concept of Interrelatedness and the Application of the Five Precepts to the Contemporary Situation

Buddhism, through its insistence on the interrelatedness of all life, its teachings of compassion for all beings, its nonviolence, and its caring for all existence, has been leading some contemporary Buddhists to broader and deeper interpretations of the relationship between social, environmental, racial and sexual justice and peace.

In this area, we should be inspired by examples of such movements like that of Ven. Bhikkhu Buddhadasa and his Garden of Liberation in Siam, not to mention the meditation practices of Ven. Phra Ajan Cha Subaddho and the scholarly work of Ven. Phra Debvedi (Payutto) which inspired not only Thai but foreign monks like Ven. Sumedho to carry the Buddhist message with social concern to Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand. However, in this paper, I want only to concentrate on one Vietnamese monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, who teaches us to pay close attention to the minute particulars in our actions, as well as to the giant web of all life.

He particularly stresses nondualism in his teachings and speaks of being peace in the moments in one's own life as part of making peace in the world. He stresses the continuity of inner and outer, calling the world our "large self," and asks us to become it actively and to care for it.

His Tiep Hien Order, created in Vietnam during the war, is in the lineage of the Zen school of Lin Chi. It is a form of engaged Buddhism in daily life, in society. The best translation of Tiep Hien, according to Thich Nhat Hanh, is the "Order of Interbeing," which he explains in this way: "I am, therefore you are, you are, therefore I am. That is the meaning of the word interbeing. We inter-are."

The Order of Interbeing is designed explicitly to address social justice and peace issues, sensitizing the participant to test his/her behavior in relation to the needs of the larger community, while freeing him/her from limiting patterns. Even the way we take refuge in the Triple Gems is explained simply and beautifully:

I take refuge in the Buddha,
the one who shows me the way in this life,
Namo Buddhaya

I take refuge in the Dharma,
the way of understanding, and love,
Namo Dharmaya

I take refuge in the Sangha,
the community of mindful harmony,
Namo Sanghaya

Thich Nhat Hanh revised the traditional five precepts to address issues of mind, speech and body:

First, do not kill. Do not let others kill. Find whatever means possible to protect life. Do not live with a vocation that is harmful to humans and nature. Second, do not steal. Possess nothing that should belong to others. Respect the property of others, but prevent others from enriching themselves from human sufferings and the sufferings of other species on earth. Third, sexual expression should not take place without love and commitment. Be fully aware of the sufferings you may cause others as a result of your misconduct. To preserve the happiness of yourself and others, respect the rights and commitments of others. Fourth, do not say untruthful things. Do not spread news that you do not know to be certain. Do not criticize or condemn things that you are unsure of. Do not utter words that cause division and hatred, that can create discord and cause the family or the community to break. All efforts should be made to reconcile and resolve all conflicts. Fifth, do not use alcohol and any other intoxicants. Be aware that your fine body has been transmitted to you by several previous generations and your parents. Destroying your body with alcohol and other intoxicants is to betray your ancestors, your parents and also to betray the future generations.

These precepts create a consciousness of, and a precedent for, social justice and peace work, grounded firmly in Buddhist principles in our individual beings and in our practice of mindfulness. As well, Thich Nhat Hanh often reminds us: "Do not lose yourself in dispersion and in your surroundings. Learn to practice breathing in order to regain composure of body and mind, to practice mindfulness, and to develop concentration and understanding."

These guiding statements achieve an integration of the traditional five precepts with elements of the Noble Eightfold Path, and I believe Thich Nhat Hanh's decision to elaborate on the traditional precepts came from his observation that one can interpret these to encourage a withdrawal from the world, a passivity in the face of war and injustice, a separation of oneself from the common lot of humanity. In rewriting the precepts, he is countering that tendency. In directing us to focus on our interconnection with other beings, he is asking us to experience the continuity between the inner and the outer world, to act in collaboration, in mutuality with others in the dynamic unfolding of the truth that nurtures justice and creates peace.

International Network of Engaged Buddhists: A Hopeful Beginning for Global Problem-Solving?

Some of us are trying to meet this challenge, and I hope what some of us are trying to do in connecting our being peace within to the outside world engagingly and mindfully, will contribute to a better world, with social justice, nonviolence and ecological balance — the Middle Way for each and for society at large, to live in harmony with one another and with nature.

Groups of young people in the west who believe in these principles and who try to act accordingly have established chapters of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia.

On top of that, some of us also have tried to meet with fellow Buddhists of like-mindedness in order to solve global problems concretely, taking some relevant issues of social justice which are near and dear to us, which we feel we could tackle individually and collectively with good friends (kalayamamitta)

in other countries and cultures. Thus, last February, in a small city outside Bangkok, some forty-five Buddhists from all over the world, including a representative from the ABCP, met:

- (1) to identify urgent social problems which exist in one's own country as well as those affecting other Buddhist communities;
- (2) to explore the ways in which participants could cooperate in acting on these issues; and
- (3) to establish a network among engaged Buddhists on a global level.

They set up four working groups to explore different issues: education, women's issues, human rights, and spirituality and activism.

It is not appropriate to go into the details of this meeting here. However, since some Buddhists have become aware of the shortcomings of the World Fellowship of Buddhists and similar organizations, they are now determined to set up the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB), with the following objectives: to promote understanding between Buddhist countries and various Buddhist sects, to facilitate and engage in solving problems in various countries, to help bring the perspective of engaged Buddhism to bear in working on these problems, to act as a clearinghouse of information on existing engaged Buddhist (and relevant non-Buddhist) groups and activities, and to aid in the coordination of efforts wherever possible.

They will initially involve groups and individuals working in the following areas: alternative education and spiritual training, peace activism, human rights, women's issues, ecology, family concerns, rural development, alternative economics, communication, and concerns of monks and nuns. This may be expanded in the future.

I trust that this newly-established network will collaborate meaningfully with our host organizations in applying Buddhism to global problem-solving.

Source: Buddhism and Global Nonviolent Problem Solving - Ulan Bator Explorations (August 1989), Edited by Glenn D. Paige and Sarah Gilliatt, University of Hawaii (1991).

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