

Buddhism — a Balancing Factor for Current World Developments

By Venerable Dhammavamsō¹

Today, the world may seem at its zenith of development. In spite of their different forms in different countries and regions, current world developments have a common point: the West (since the Renaissance) and the East (since the past century) have developed along materialistic lines. As a result, various things have been replaced with others in both the environmental and human fields. For the past decades some Buddhist scholars, in the face of so many social changes, have attempted to reassess the role of Buddhism in the new situation of the world. Hence, a question is raised as to whether traditional Buddhism, which has shaped the civilization of many peoples in the East for centuries, may remain adaptive and fluid in the modern era.

Generally speaking, there are two discernible different tendencies among those scholars. Some scholars such as Thich Nhat Hanh, Walpola Rahula, Sulak Sivaraksa, H.H. the Dalai Lama, Robert Thurman, and so on, maintain that there remains a continuity between Buddhism today and Buddhism of the past. Although the world is changing rapidly with its various developments, humanity's fundamental sufferings and the best ways of dealing with them remain the same as what are already explicitly formulated in most Buddhist teachings. Therefore, Buddhism today, whatever new forms it may take on, is essentially contiguous with its tradition. In the words of Sivaraksa: "To be of help we must become more selfless and less selfish. To do this, we have to take more and more moral responsibility in society. This is the essence of religion, from ancient times up to the present." (1988: 12)

Meanwhile, other scholars such as Joseph Kitagawa, Christopher Queen, Kenneth Kraft, Ken Jones, and so forth, assert that traditional Buddhism is

¹ Venerable Dhammavaso (Nguyen Van Thong) is Principal of Vietnam Theravada Buddhist College at Huyen Khong Monastery, Huong Ho Community, Huong Tra District Hue City, Vietnam.

not interested in social engagement at all; or rather, there may be some perceivable social implications latent in Buddhist texts but they are not documentary evidence of any given socio-political-economic norms and paradigms. In the words of Kitagawa: “Neither the monastics nor the laity seemed to have given much thought one way or the other to the norms and structures of the social and political order, which to them had no immediate religious significance.” (1980: 89)

Most Buddhist scholars of the latter tendency are in agreement with Kitagawa about his claim. To back up this contention, Ken Jones offered a description of the three distinct types of Buddhist “social action”:

- (1) Alternative Societal Models (for example, monastic and quasi-monastic communities) and particularly “right livelihood”;
- (2) Social Helping, Service and Welfare, both in employment and voluntarily;
- (3) Radical Activism (directed to fundamental institutional and social changes, culminating in societal metamorphosis). (1989: 216)

Thus, “engaged Buddhist” scholars, whether they claim a continuity or discontinuity between Buddhism today and its tradition, have more or less suggested some modifications, either methodological or ideological, in Buddhist theories and practices such that they may be effectively applied to the cessation of suffering in the modern world.

Before asking whether engaged Buddhist scholars’ suggestions may be practicable in the current world situation, let us take an overview of what issues are being confronted and how they may be resolved by the world today.

In *Theory of Complexity and Applications*, when dealing with the impact of socio-political-economic norms and structures upon individual and social life Nam P. Suh writes:

Socio-political-economic issues may be grouped under three categories:

1. Protection from “fear” factors – health care, defense, natural disasters, man-made disasters, welfare, social security
2. Responding to “greed” factors – economy, stock market, productivity, wealth accumulation, investment
3. Fulfilling of human aspirations – scientific discoveries, invention and innovation, space exploration, freedom. (2003: 252)

Also in his view governments are organized to manage these three basic issues. Various means of dealing with them which governments have adopted are that (to deal with the “fear” factors) society supports hospitals, police, army, research on biology and medicine, earthquake mitigation, safety rules and procedures, welfare systems, and **religion**; that (to deal with the “greed” factors) society uses such instruments as: reward for investment, protection of financial and capital markets, the right to own real estate, and support for the value of the currency; and that (to deal with human aspirations) society supports noble causes such as space exploration, scientific and technological explorations, and **schools**, and by protecting the right to be free.

That is how modern humanity should do to deal with these socio-political-economic issues, which are considered “complex for two reasons: (1) our inability to design the policies to assure the desired future outcome and (2) the uncertainty of the future outcome.” And Nam P. Suh goes on with his critical analysis: “The uncertainties associated with these issues increase with an increase in the number of organizations or individuals that can affect the outcome, making them more complex. The complexity of socio-political-economic issues also increases with the increasing uncertainty of future events and circumstances. During the past 50 years alone, society has changed in totally unexpected ways because of many developments: new technologies, new drugs, tyrants, religious movements, scientific discoveries, migration of people, free trade, free flow of information across all boundaries, revolutions, natural disasters, and wars. Thus people and information can no longer be managed and manipulated by only a few.”

Accordingly, the solution that he advances is that “The role of government is to manage and reduce the complexity in improving the quality of life of its citizens and in resolving the socio-political-economic issues that are related to fear, greed, and aspirations. An ideal government’s role is to provide freedom, welfare, health, and prosperity to its people, as well as protection from external and internal adversaries. To achieve these goals, many types of government have been formed. ...The effectiveness of government varies a great deal among different countries, depending on the political system, the shared culture of its people, the resources available, the general level of education, **and in some cases, religion.**” (2000: 253)

If the above-cited presentation by Nam P. Suh may be acknowledged to be representative of the world’s current general view of socio-political-economic issues and practicable measures to resolve them, it may undoubtedly reveal some definite difficulties to those Buddhists (either “engaged” or “disengaged”) whose efforts are being made in the hope of

lessening partly the suffering of mankind on earth. For, however enthusiastic and worldly experienced they may be, it will be hard for them to meet the given requirements of modern humanity. What and how would they do to contribute to the establishment of “an ideal government”? Are “health care, defense, natural disasters, man-made disasters, welfare, social security” substantive factors of “fear”? Will “economy, stock market, productivity, wealth accumulation, investment” be able to respond to humanity’s “greed”? Can “scientific discoveries, invention and innovation, space exploration, freedom” really fulfill human aspirations?

As a religion characterized by non-violence, selflessness, abandonment of unwholesome mental-vocal-bodily actions, purification of body and mind for a better life, and so forth, how would Buddhist teachings be “modified” to generate a socio-political-economic system, which is generally being viewed as the decisive factor of all current world developments and crises, and should be decided and managed not by all citizens but by government alone?

Historically, the afore-said presentation reminds us of “freedom, welfare, health, and prosperity,” and “protection from external and internal adversaries” that were actually provided not only to Indian people by Asoka’s government, but also to Ceylonese people by Devanampiyatissa’s, to Tibetan people by Sron-btsan-sgam-po’s, to Nepalese people by Amsuvarman’s, to Chinese people by Liang Wu-ti’s, to Burmese people by Anawratha’s, to Thai people by Mahadharmikarajadhiraja’s, to Cambodian people by Jayavarman’s, to Vietnamese people by Ly Thai To’s, to Japanese people by Shotoku’s, etc. These governments differed a great deal in historical and geographical backgrounds but depended on the same political system, feudalism, and the same religion, Buddhism, not in some but all cases. Also we are reminded of governments that failed and are failing to gain similar achievements even in the modern era.

Suffice it to say that the fact that Buddhists are not provided with any knowledge of some socio-political-economic norms and structures from Buddhist teachings does not mean that they are not interested in social engagement. The single reason why they may be misunderstood as “socially disengaged” is that from Buddhist teachings they learn that it is humans but not any institutions, structures, organizations that should be considered as the most decisive condition of constructing (and destroying) themselves and the world around. This is most definitely formulated in the first two verses of the *Dhammapada*. Happiness or suffering depends upon nothing other than human mind.

Thus it should be noticed that Buddhism in general has never aimed at changing the whole world. The world as it is (that is, conditioned) arises and disappears, depending upon its own conditions, including humans and their actions. So it is not any God, not any superhuman force but humanity, (in which Buddhists are included,) that decides the destiny of this planet. Upon this principle, the only thing Buddhism can do is to show or remind humanity how and what they have to do to preserve the world and all kinds of life living on it, as great as possible. So far, if humans lack true comprehension of the true nature of the world and the true cause of the world, they will never find out an appropriate way to change the world. All these things were already introduced to mankind over twenty five centuries by Buddha Gotama, the Sakyamuni. Yet, how many people across the world have attempted to study and apply these techniques towards the development of themselves and the world? From the Buddhist view, development in the true sense of the term does not and cannot mean the increase of delusions, selfish desires, hatred, jealousy, pride, impurity, frustrations, conflicts, warfare, terrors, famine, natural disasters, and the like. If all of these things may be regarded as part of the whole current development of the world, Buddhism will not and cannot contribute anything to it. Instead, Buddhism is making its greatest efforts to *balance* the current world developments by supplying various socio-political-economic systems with “components” possessed of *compassion* and *right understanding*. For (1) a socio-political-economic system that can really yield peace and prosperity must be designed and carried out and managed by those who are possessed of compassion and right understanding; and (2) Buddhists have been educated and disciplined to become personalities of such qualities, but not “slaves,” in this system, from ancient times up to the present.

Bibliography

1. Russell, Bertrand, *A History of Western Philosophy*, published by Simon and Schuster, 1945.
2. Dalai Lama, H. H., *The Dalai Lama's Book of Daily Meditations*, ed. by Renuka Singh, Rider, Sydney, 1998.
3. Jones, Ken, *The Social Face of Buddhism: An Approach to Political and Social Activism*. London: Wisdom Publications, 1989.

4. Jaspers, Karl, *The Future of Mankind*, transl. by E. B. Ashton, the University of Chicago Press, 1968.
5. Kitagawa, Joseph M., “Buddhism and social change: An Historical Perspective” in *Buddhist Studies in Honor of Walpola Rahula*, ed. by Somaratna Balasooriya, et al. London: Gordon Fraser, 1980.
6. Lopez, Jr., Donald S., ed. *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
7. Murti, T. R. V., *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., London, 1874.
8. Nam P. Suh, *Theory of Complexity and Applications*, 2003, www.santafe.edu.
9. Nhat Hanh, Thich, “Love in Action” in *Engaged Buddhist Reader*, ed. by Arnold Kotler. Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1996.
10. Queen, Christopher S. and Sallie B. King, eds. *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996.
11. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., London, 1958.
12. Saul K. Padover, *The Meaning of Democracy*, Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, Washington, 1963.
13. Pandita, Sayadaw U, *In This Very Life*, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Sri Lanka, 1991.
14. Sivaraksa, Sulak, “Buddhism in a World of Change” in *The Path of Compassion: Writings on Socially Engaged Buddhism in the West*, ed. by Fred Eppsteiner. Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1988.
15. Tulku, Tarthang, , *Time, Space and Knowledge*, Dharma Publishing, Emeryville, California, 1977.
16. — *Skillful Means*, Dharma Publishing, Berkeley, California, 1978.
17. *2500 Years of Buddhism*, the Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1956.
18. Rahula, Walpola, *What the Buddha Taught*, Grove Press, Inc. New York, 1962.