

Harnessing Buddhist Wisdom for People's Well-being¹

by

Most Venerable Tirikunamale Ananda Mahanāyaka Thera

Prelate of the Amarapura Sri Dharmarakshita Sect &

Abbot of Siri Vajirāramaya

The Dhamma or the teaching of the Buddha, the Enlightened One, in the 6th century BCE reveals a timeless universal path that can be applied equally to the entire world, even in the 21st century. It is not only a Path of liberation from repeated births in *Samsāra* but also an excellent way of life to be lived in this world, based on humane qualities such as equality of all, compassion and loving-kindness. It also provides valid criteria for ascertaining deviant behaviour and problems, narrow divisive emotions, and desire for wealth and power due to greed and lust. The Buddha's teaching identifies them as resulting from harmful unwholesome thoughts and instantaneous reactions to situations that arise in an untrained mind. Taking these factors into consideration, the contribution of Buddhist wisdom for the well-being of people is immense; because it reveals to the world a Path of peace and liberation.

The Path to follow shown by the Buddha is without any shackles and open to everyone. It has the capability, on the one hand, to resolve any man-made problem that exists in the world, and on the other, to achieve one's personal, social and economic advancement. Moreover, that path which is environmentally sensitive enlists not only humane compassion, individual freedom,

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social justice, peaceful coexistence and economic security, but also the welfare of all sentient beings. It is the responsibility of the Buddhists of today to utilise that Noble Path for the good and well-being of the entire world, without confining it within boundaries and without polluting it with logical and speculative views and ideologies.

Although Buddhism can be analysed in different ways, these are all explanations woven round the Four Noble Truths. Its final goal can only be realized through diligent practice. In other words, the Dhamma or teachings can be comprehended not through mere belief, devotional practices, chanting or listening, but through practical observance in one's own life-journey. Such practical observance supersedes always theoretical knowledge. The Buddha is saluted as *vijjācaraṇa sampanno* - “a teacher endowed with clear vision and virtuous conduct” and his life highlights the perfect balance between supreme wisdom and flawless virtue. The wisdom is not mere knowledge, but a vision that is combined with unblemished ethical behaviour. Wisdom shines through good character - *apadāna sobhinī paññā* are the words of the Tathāgata.

Every exposition and every segment of the three-fold training (*ti-sikkhā*) starting with virtue *sīla*, positively ensures the benign existence of the entire universe both animate and inanimate. The Buddha-aspirant, the *Bodhisatta*, after toiling for aeons became a Buddha, an Enlightened One, to liberate beings from suffering. Addressing the first sixty disciples, he asked them to wander for the benefit and happiness of many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, benefit and happiness of gods and men. To that end, the Buddha earnestly requested them to make known this Dhamma to the outside world by not even two going on the same direction.

Buddhism teaches that working for one's own well-being and that of others are like the two sides of the same coin. One should not be at the expense of the other to gain true happiness. When one protects oneself, it also protects others. Similarly, when protecting others there is protection to oneself. Protecting oneself is by way of pursuing the fourfold Foundations of Mindfulness - *satipaṭṭhāna*. Protecting others is by spreading loving-kindness and compassion through mental, vocal, and physical actions, and by propagating non-violence. This makes it clear that there is no demarcating line between one's own well-being and that of others. The lives led by the Buddha's disciples bear testimony to this.

The five precepts that are outlined in Buddhism could be considered the basis of a common moral code for the well-being of the entire world. The five precepts become meaningful only when they are observed not merely by abstinence, but by putting into practice the positive aspects enshrined therein. These are spreading of loving-kindness (*mettā*), non-violence (*avihiṃsā*), and fearlessness (*abhaya*) to countless beings. When taken as a whole, the five precepts are extremely helpful for both personal development and the preservation of society.

The Buddha, one may say, is a living embodiment of great compassion and great wisdom. His great compassion blossomed parallelly with his great wisdom, and, vice versa, his great wisdom blossomed parallelly with his great compassion. It is my considered view that the historic role of a special conference like this is not merely to discuss and propose pragmatic strategies for resolving certain global social, economic, political and environmental problems of modern society. It is also to present an action plan to the world in general, guided by the great compassion and the great wisdom of the Buddha.

In this regard, I wish to make the following three proposals to be considered by the panel.

- (A) To design a political system of good governance based on the foundational guidelines provided in the Tenfold Duties of a Ruler (*dasa rāja dharma*) and the Four Embracing Virtues (*sangraha vastu*) for the well-being of the world's citizens.
- (B) To pave the way for the systematic practice of mindfulness, namely, the foundations of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*), in educational and professional institutions as an antidote to social violence and mental stress, and to establish harmony.
- (C) To review the relevance or usefulness of the Buddha's Teachings (wisdom) for the preservation of the environment, including the reduction of global warming, and develop a mechanism that would promote the well-being of all living organisms in the entire living world.



*Yathāpi puppharāsimhā, - kayirā mālāguṇe bahū
evaṃ jātena maccena - kattabbaṃ kusalaṃ bahuṃ (v.53)*

As from a heap of flowers many a garland is made, even so many good deeds should be done by one born as a mortal.

*Na pupphagandho paṭivātameti - na candanaṃ tagaramallikā vā
sataṃ ca gandho paṭivātameti; - sabbā disā sappuriso pavāti. (v.54)*

The perfume of flowers blows not against the wind, nor does the fragrance of sandalwood, *tagara* and jasmine. The fragrance of the virtuous does blow against the wind; the virtuous man pervades every direction.

*Candanaṃ tagaraṃ vāpi - uppalaṃ atha vassiki,
etesaṃ gandhajātānaṃ - sīlagandho anuttaro. (v.55)*

Sandalwood, *tagara*, lotus jasmine – of all these kinds of fragrance, the perfume of virtue is by far the best.

Dhammapada, Puppha Vagga