

BUDDHISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM

[Dr. Kamla Chowdhry](#)

Chairperson

Centre for Science and Environment

India

Although enormous global attention, in recent years, has been focused on environmental concerns, including the historic UNCED meeting in Rio in June 1992, the health and well-being of Earth, its people, and other living creatures, continue to deteriorate and decline. Agenda 21, emerging from UNCED discussions, is a document with the hope for a program of action dealing with the varied, complex and interrelated issues of poverty, environment and development. However, the implementation of Agenda 21, requires more than good intentions, international negotiations and conventions, and ever-increasing funding. In a final sense the resolution of global environmental problems and a move toward sustainable development will be based on the moral and ethical values of equity, justice and compassion for others. It is in this context that the Conference on Buddhism and the Environment is important for focusing attention on fundamental questions as to how society should live and share, and how much should it produce and consume.

The Present Picture

Hunger and Malnutrition

An increasing number of human lives are being lost to hunger and malnutrition. Estimates of severely malnourished people range from 450 million (FAO) to one billion (World Bank). Experts agree that the total number of hungry people has never been so high, and that these numbers are increasing. According to the World Food Council the number of hungry people increased five times faster in the 1980's than in the previous decade. UNICEF estimates that 15 million children die of hunger and hunger-related diseases.

The food security of large numbers in the developing countries is at risk, not only because of increased population numbers, as is often stated, but also because of related questions of equity, trade agreements, subsidies, import restrictions and repayment problems related to international debt.

The industrialised countries, representing not quite 25% of the world population, consume three-quarters of the world's food production. In terms of the grain equivalent, the present four billion people living in the developing world consume 250 kilograms per capita per year on average, compared to an average of 450 kilograms per capita in the European Union (EU) and in the USA. Over-consumption in one part of the world leads to destitution elsewhere.

The total amount of food required to end world hunger is not much. Based on FAO and International Food Policy Research Institute calculations, 15 to 20 million tons of cereals would be sufficient to end world hunger. The problem, however, does not lie in global food production but in the power of the rich countries to serve their own interests at the expense of poor countries. Julius Nyrere, Chairman of the South Commission, speaking at the International Conference on Future Challenges in June 1991, said: "I am asking that you should recognise in practice that human equality does not stop at national or continental boundaries, and that the equal rights of sovereign nations demand respect for the rights of the poor and should encourage their governments to co-operate in a re-examination of the world economic order, so as to agree on changes which will lead to greater justice for the poor."¹

At a national level, too, governments of the South have not paid sufficient attention to issues of equity, justice and people's participation in choices for development, issues which the teachings of Buddha emphasise.

Lifestyles and Consumerism

Lifestyles in the USA and other rich countries are based on high levels of consumption. And high consumption levels ultimately lead to high environmental damage and problems of waste disposal. Many environmentalists, especially the Greens, challenge the kind of industrialisation that has emerged in the last 200 years, devastating the environment and creating problems of hunger and oppression elsewhere.

Per capita consumption of energy, which is a good indicator of consumption levels of nations, shows that the USA uses 10,127 kilograms of coal-equivalent; West Germany 5377; Japan, 4032; China, 810; India, 307 and Bangladesh, 69.2 In other words, an average USA citizen consumes 20 times more paper, 100 times more cement, which is 15 times more than per capita use in India.³ Even drinking water seems to travel long distances across the oceans for some US citizens. In 1989, about 190 million litres of mineral water were imported.²

In general, more trade means more consumerism, more goods transported around the world, more fuel and energy used, resulting in greater levels of pollution and degradation of the environmental base. The Xochicall Foundation in Mexico estimated that to put 2200 k/cal of food on the table requires 1900 k/cal, that is, about the same amount of energy in processing, packaging, transporting, marketing, etc.⁴

If the developing nations were to provide for their population the level of consumption now prevailing in the industrialised countries, the use of energy, raw materials, etc., would have to increase very substantially, inevitable leading to global warming, climate change, soil degradation, desertification, acid rain, pollution of lakes, sea and oceans, erosion of genetic resources, weakening of the social fabric and human distress.

Jonathan Porrit, Director of Friends of the Earth, emphasising the need for greater equity among nations writes: "Though equity does not entail absolutely equal shares it certainly implies a more or less fair share, for more or less everyone. That either means that our existing material standard of living will gradually become available to all five billion souls with whom we currently share this planet (let alone the 10 billion with whom we shall be sharing it by 2025), or it means that we should be prepared to reduce our standard of living to the point where some approximation of equity may be achieved."⁵

If the industrialised countries continue their ever increasing consumption patterns and lifestyles then there will be no escape from an unequal and divided world, the coexistence of glut and waste on the one hand, with famine and disease on the other hand. Henry Thoreau, urging his contemporaries to find fulfilment in the simplicity of the natural world, said, "A man is rich in proportion to the number of things he can afford to let alone."

Toxic Industries

In Canada, for instance, when domestic sales of asbestos declined as a result of public health concerns, the industry, in collaboration with its government, promoted sales abroad. Ninety-five percent of the asbestos Canada produces is now exported, largely to the developing countries.³

Pesticide producers pursue a similar policy of international expansion. The US General Accounting Office estimated that in 1989, 23% of the pesticides exported were unregistered because of their harmful qualities.⁶ In Britain, too, John Madeley in an article entitled Britain and the Third World writes: "Britain has continued to use the Third World as a dumping ground for pesticides which are either banned or severely restricted on health and environmental grounds in Britain and other countries."³ Banned pesticides often return on imported food, a phenomenon known as the poisoned circle.

The dilemmas posed by the need to expand trade and establish safe havens for toxic industries are formidable and urgent. The urgency arises from the fact that environmental issues are becoming important factors in regional and global trade negotiations.

The border region between the USA and Mexico has been used as a haven for environmentally dangerous industries. In 1991, three-quarters of the companies in this region known as maquiladoras were found to have toxic discharges, causing cancer, birth defects, brain damage, etc. The effluents were being emptied into open ditches running through settlements near the factories.¹⁰ A Mitsubishi Kasei Corporation subsidiary was forced to close down in Malaysia by court order, after years of protest by local residents, for dumping radioactive thorium which led to high levels of leukaemia.

Several studies have documented that industries, particularly their hazardous operations, are being relocated in developing countries, which are eager for employment and meagre wages, and where enforcement of environmental laws is weak. The Bhopal tragedy in which thousands of people died overnight of a poisonous gas leak, and where, even after years, many are suffering from the toxic effects of a subsidiary of a US chemical plant located in Bhopal, is an example.

International Debt and International Aid

The developing countries, in their attempts at economic growth, have been exporting many primary products at the expense of their environment and borrowing money for their technological development. The forests of the Philippines, Indonesia and now Malaysia have been deforested to export wood to Japan. Similarly, Africa has been exporting wood for the needs of Europe to such an extent that it now needs to import wood for its own urgent needs.

In 1989, the Developing World's external debt stood at US \$1.2 trillion, 44% of its collective GNP. Developing countries paid US \$77 billion in interest on their debts that year, and repaid US \$85 billion worth of principal. Since 1983, the net flow of capital has been reversed, and the poor countries now pay more to the rich than they receive.⁷ Ultimately, the environmental destruction caused by the demands for development cannot be halted without major debt relief for developing countries.

Buddha preached dana, the giving of one's possessions, even one's life for the good of others. Let us look at the degree of official aid, dana, that flows from the industrialised to the needy countries. As UNDP's 1993 Human Development Report shows, official development

assistance (ODA) as a percentage of a country's GNP in 1991 was - Japan, 0.32%; Norway, 1.14%; the USA, 0.17%; the UK, 0.32%; Germany 0.41%. The USA, the richest nation among the rich industrialised countries, gives only 0.17% of its GNP as official aid. And even here more than half was earmarked for five strategically important countries: Israel, Egypt, Turkey, the Philippines and El Salvador. The dominant objective in giving such aid has been political gain, not dana in the Buddhist sense, the desire to do good for others. The UNDP report also points out that twice as much ODA per capita goes to high military spenders; only a quarter of ODA goes to the 10 countries containing three-quarters of the world's poor; less than 7% is earmarked for human priority concerns. Not only is most ODA not dana in the Buddhist sense, it is very much tied to the donor country's own profit. The 1993 UNDP Report adds: "The real threat in the next few decades is that global poverty will begin to travel without a passport in many unpleasant forms: drugs, diseases, terrorism, migration. Poverty anywhere is a threat to prosperity everywhere." The Bible echoes Buddha's concept of dana and asks, "What shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" The present picture is not encouraging. If we are to act as the vigilant custodians of the Earth, we must pay greater attention to the ethical gaps, to Buddha and his dhamma.

Buddha and his Dhamma

In the 6th century BC, Siddharth Gautam was born in the Sakya clan. At the age of 20, according to custom, he was initiated and became a member of the Sakya Sangh (Council). In the eighth year of his membership, an event took place that changed his life. The event is significant because it underscores Gautam's approach to a problem of conflict of interests, and the emphasis he placed on the self-acceptance of responsibility for action, regardless of the consequences to himself. The lessons from Buddha's life and teachings are worth pondering with regard to the deep conflicts over trade, prices and other international negotiations for distributing and sharing the Earth's resources. If Agenda 21 is to succeed, we will need to reflect on the ethical basis of action and responsibility, as Gautam Buddha did, faced with a situation of conflict and choice.

The story goes: "Bordering on the State of the Sakyas was the State of Koliyas. The two kingdoms were divided by the river Rohini. The sharing of the river waters caused many fights. In the eighth year there was a major clash. The Sakyas felt that the issue must be settled once and for all and the Koliyas taught a lesson. Addressing the members of the Sangh, the Sakya Senapati said: "Our people have been attacked by the Koliyas and they had to retreat. Such acts of aggression by the Koliyas have taken place more than once. We have tolerated them so far. This cannot go on. It must be stopped and the only way to stop it is to declare war against the Koliyas. I propose the Sangh declare war on the Koliyas."8

Siddharth Gautam opposed the resolution. He said, "War does not solve any question. Waging war will not serve our purpose. It will sow the seeds of another war. A man who despoils is despoiled in his turn. I suggest that we elect two men from our side and the Koliyas should be asked to elect two, and the four should elect a fifth person and these should settle the dispute."

The Senapati reiterated that this menace would not stop unless the Koliyas were severely punished. The two resolutions were put to the vote and Gautam's resolution lost by an overwhelming majority."

It is explained that Gautam then had three options open to him after this vote: to join the forces and participate in the war, to consent to being hanged or exiled, or to allow the members of his family to be condemned to a social boycott and confiscation of property. Gautam was firm in not accepting the first, and the third he felt was unthinkable. Under the circumstances he chose the second option Siddharth was 29 years of age when he underwent Parivraja, that is, exile and renunciation.

Buddhist Activism: My Life is my Message

In the last decade or so a great deal of awareness has been created about the environment and the need for sustainable development. The solutions considered necessary to move towards sustainable development and friendly growth seem to be largely in terms of better technologies, impact assessment and improved environmental laws, trade agreements, etc. There is largely silence when dealing with the basic problem of consumerism and lifestyles, and their underlying values of wanting more and more. To raise a voice against consumerism, against the new gods of economic growth, and the very definition of progress, is a cry in the wilderness. Agenda 21 is full of good intentions. But there is a wide gap between the goals sought and the means and mechanisms relied on to achieve them. The gap is an ethical one. The World Council of Churches in the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee on Climate Change attempts to monitor each session, bringing forward ethical issues which must be addressed in the process of negotiations.9

Although monitoring and raising ethical issues in such inter-governmental forums is important, the first step, however, is to change one's own personal behaviour, one's own lifestyle and values. Faced with a crisis, Buddha chose renunciation - exchanged riches for poverty, comfort for alms, home for homelessness. When faced with the environmental crisis, how many in the rich countries are willing to forego goods, to promote equity, act in compassion so as to promote sustainable development and thus safeguard the Earth?

Gandhiji, too, emphasised austerity and the moral principle in development, where his priorities focused on the rural poor, antoyadha, the

poorest of the poor. He believed in denying oneself what could not be shared with them. Gandhiji practised what he preached. He lived a life of austerity because, as he said, "He who has made the ideal of equal distribution a part of his being would reduce his wants to a minimum, bearing in mind the poverty of India."

Again, to quote Gandhiji with regard to more and more wants, he said: "We have to learn to put a curb on our material wants. The mind is a restless bird, the more it gets the more it wants and still remains unsatisfied. Our forefathers knew that if we set our hearts on such things we would become slaves and lose our moral fibre."

It seems that we have lost our moral fibre. The questioning of consumerism, of lifestyles, of wanting more and more, is not an agenda for discussion in international forums. Ethical and moral issues are pushed under the carpet. Economic growth and new technologies are expected to solve environmental and poverty issues, and safeguard the Earth.

In a dialogue between Goldsmith, editor of the Ecologist, and Krishna Cahitanya of India, both agree that there are enough studies and evidence to show that the world is moving in the wrong direction. Cahitanya questions the will to change: "Yes, we know it is all wrong, we have got to go back (change) but can we do it...? Many of the people in the well-paid death industries are sending their children to Ivy League schools, living in fine apartments, and maintaining a high standard of living. Going back to peace and sustainable development means not only surrendering those standards but may mean even privation. Are we prepared for it?"¹⁰

The answer, clearly and loudly, is that people are not prepared to give up what Gandhiji called the "toys of civilisation." Some inner conversion is needed. Buddhism directed humankind's search inwards, to the potentiality hidden within. This is why the life and teachings of Buddha have acquired a new relevance. The practice of non-possession, renunciation, non-violence, of living in harmony with nature has to acquire a new significance if the Earth is to be protected and preserved.

In his first sermon, Buddha asks his disciples: "Why do men not mind enslaving and dominating others? Why do men not mind making the lives of others unhappy? Is it because men are not righteous in their conduct towards another?" Yes indeed, for in the earlier discussion of the present state of affairs, we have seen men and nations are not righteous in their conduct toward one another. Let us look again at some aspects of international trade and ask the same question that Buddha did, "Why do men (and nations) endeavour to enslave and dominate others?"

In international trade and its governing institutions, e.g. GATT and the Uruguay Round, the developing countries complain of non-righteous conduct towards them. The developing countries are not exporters of food, raw-materials, and fuel to the industrial world. Most developing countries are particularly vulnerable to trade-inflicted damage. Subsidised corn from the USA is sold in Mexico, putting millions of Mexican farmers out of business. Similarly, farmers in the Netherlands are subsidised by their government, so that milk powder, butter and other dairy products can be sold in developing countries, to the detriment of millions of local farmers. According to UNDP, developing countries lose some US \$100 billion in agricultural sales per year as a result of quotas, tariffs and other trade barriers imposed by industrialised nations. The long-term solution to poverty, it says, "is not charity, it is more equitable access for poor nations to global market opportunities."

Julius Nyrere bemoans: "The leading countries of the North use their power in pursuit of their objectives. The fate of the South is increasingly dictated by the perception and policies of governments in the North, and by the multilateral institutions, which a few of these governments control. Domination has been reinforced, where partnership for development was required."

The reality is that GATT, UNCTAD, the World Bank and other international institutions are heavily biased in favour of the already rich countries. The various empires of the British, French, Spanish and others were based on enslaving people and using the resources of the conquered lands for their own benefit. The tools and mechanisms of domination have changed in the 20th century.

As a result of international trade and the way the international economic system works, the developing countries are at a disadvantage, sinking deeper and deeper into poverty and debt. As mentioned earlier, the developing world's external debt stood at US \$1.2 trillion in 1989 and the traditional flow of capital from North to South was reversed, the poor countries paying more to the rich than they received in return. We may well ask loudly and clearly whether we can have sustainable development without righteous conduct, and without dominating and enslaving others.

Conclusion

In a final sense, sustainable economic growth, removal of poverty, hunger and malnutrition is not merely a function of economic planning or technological innovations, but stems from a moral force which will not accept hunger, nor the widening disparities between rich and poor nations.

We have seen that the developing countries are situated unfavourably within the international economic system, and that they are powerless to influence those processes and institutions that govern trade, prices, and such issues as intellectual property rights. If UNCED and Agenda 21 are to succeed, leadership on ethical and moral grounds, such as that provided by Buddha and Gandhiji need to emerge to lead the

environmental movement, emphasising equity, justice and compassion for the oppressed.

Buddha taught that, "A religion which does not preach equality is not worth having - a religion must tolerate no oppression." We need a new world order based on Buddhist philosophy and teachings to safeguard the environment and the Earth. In his first sermon Buddha asks the Parivrajakas, "Is not love for humanity necessary? And they say, Yes." He continued: "I go further and say Love is not merely enough; what is required is maitri. It is wider than love. It means fellowship not only for human beings but for all living beings." It is becoming increasingly clear that one cannot have an ecological movement unless there is a shift in values towards harmony with nature and non-violence towards all living beings. Sustainable development, equitable development is not likely to come about unless there is a moral concern for maitri and ahimsa.

Sir Eric Ashby in his Jeon Sloss Junior Memorial Lectures, delivered at Stanford University, raises the maitri question in a different way. He asks whether nature is to be valued for its intrinsic worth; whether there ought to be an I-Thou relationship with nature. Scientists have become more and more impressed by the interdependence of nature. Animals, green plants, insects, bacteria are all partners with humanity in the same system. The idea of humans as lords of nature is, in the minds of scientists, replaced by the idea of humans being in symbiosis with nature. As early as the sixth century BC, Buddha taught people to be in harmony with nature - not as Lords of nature, as suggested in the Judeo-Christian ideology. And God said: "Let us make men in our image after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the Earth. (Genesis 1:26 King James Bible)."

Justice Douglas of the USA has advocated that the rights of nature should be legally protected. In traditional cultures these rights were embodied in religious beliefs and taboos - a different way of bowing to the complexities of nature and the need not to disturb nature too much.

The Three Reconciliations

The reconciliation of humankind with nature is partly what the environmental movement is all about. But it is more than reconciliation with nature. As Eric Ashby points out: "There are two other reconciliations which need to be made: to moderate humanity's demands upon the earth's resources of energy and raw materials, and to determine how affluent societies will become reconciled to a more equitable distribution and sharing of resources. The other reconciliation is of human beings with other members of their own species - black, white, yellow, brown, and people who live with different ideologies, philosophies or religions."¹¹

Gautam Buddha talked about righteous behaviour - not enslaving or dominating others. He preached maitri, and dana, the giving of one's possessions for the good of others. Buddha not only preached but practised. Gandhian philosophy, similar to Buddha's teachings, also talked about ahimsa, antoyodha, and practised it. Gandhiji said, "My life is my message". Who amongst the emerging environmental leaders can say, "My life is my message?"

Rio's success will be measured not only by raising more funds, organising more conventions and conferences, or establishing more environmental institutions, but essentially by inner change and the practice of the three reconciliations mentioned earlier, by the emphasis on ahimsa, antoyodha and austerity and by following the dhamma of Buddha. In a final sense, environmental concerns are moral and ethical, and until we recognise this there will be only talk and no action.

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Dr. Kamla Chowdhry is a leading policy-maker for the Government of India. In her long managerial and academic career, she has served as Vice-Chairman and Director of the Society for Promotion of Wastelands Development, Advisor on Public Planning and Management at the Ford Foundation, Visiting Professor at the Harvard Business School, Director of the Research Centre for Group Dynamics ATIRA and Head of the Human Relations Division of Ahmedabad Textile Industry's Research Association. She has played a key role in establishing and building national and international institutions dealing with development, poverty management, environment and ecology, rural development, women's issues, irrigation and agroforestry. Her many memberships include the Advisory Board on Energy - Government of India, the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development, the National Council for Applied Economic Research, the Indian Institute of Technology and the World Commission on Environment and Development, Geneva. She also serves as member of the Technical Advisory Committee of the Consultative Group of International Agriculture Research, member of the Board of the National Foundation of India and the Aga Khan Rural Development Support Services, and Chairperson of several institutions, including the Forum for Agricultural Research, the Centre for Science and Environment, and the All India Council of Management Studies.