

RELIGION AND WORLD ORDER  
FROM A BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE

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1. Working Toward a Shared Global Ethic

I do not believe that a world ethic can be imposed as a product of philosophical ratiocination. It will not be deduced from universal moral principles or derived from the postulation of a common human nature. The search for some underlying metaphysical truth as a ground for morality entails a subject-object dualism that is rejected in Buddhist teachings. Moreover, an axiology that serves the cause of civilization does not exist as some abstract conceptual doctrine but is formulated by the attitudes and beliefs that serve to condition the behavior of individuals.

The moral principles that are meaningful for a given society are those that are embedded in the culture and traditions of that society. They are historically conditioned and contingent. They do, however, represent the principles that evolved from the villages and communities to govern social organization before new values were superimposed through violence or propaganda.

A cultural dialogue that involves comparing and contrasting the values of various societies should not be undertaken as a means of establishing the inherent validity of any particular set of values. Nor should it be assumed that all conflicts can be resolved and that one consistent ethic will emerge from the process. The dialectical process can reveal the common elements of the moral view of different cultures and the manner in which those elements are contravened by incompatible strictures. In this process Buddhism can provide an evaluative standard, rooted in human experience, by which the efficacy of a given tenet may be assessed.

The elimination of suffering is the ultimate concern of Buddhist teachings. All conduct can be evaluated in terms of its capacity to promote or delimit suffering. In some respect all values which can be defined as ethical values must address suffering. No moral system can be oblivious to this factor, although the concepts may be expressed in various vocabularies.

For Buddhism it is the practice of individualizing experience which is the essential cause of suffering. Characterizing experience dualistically in terms of objects existing in relationship to a transcendental subject generates the greed, anger, and delusion which forms the substratum of discontentment. The path to personal liberation entails the renunciation of this worldview in favor of a recognition of the interdependence of all beings. This transformation requires that the maxim of every action reflect the interrelationship with others and the responsibility for their well-being.

An ethical system must define the relationship of the individual to the community. A moral decision by our general understanding of the term requires that some consideration be given to something beyond parochial self-interest. Somehow the needs and interests of others must be taken into account. Compassion, the core concept of Buddhist morality, entails the appreciation of these needs and interests.

Every community has, by virtue of its existence as a community, been required to confront the antinomy between self-interest and the social conception of justice. For Buddhists no contradiction exists, because compassion simultaneously serves both the community and the individual. Compassion is an instrumentality of liberation and a means by which an individual frees himself or herself from suffering. All great ethical systems suggest a higher stage of self-attainment through unselfish conduct. Ethical behavior must diminish suffering if there is to be some purpose or justification for moral conduct.

Throughout history, currents of nationalism and racism have attempted to circumscribe the scope of ethical concerns. These efforts to limit compassion to national boundaries or specific ethnic groups are incongruent with the essential character of compassion as understood in the Buddhist tradition. The dialectical method can reveal that these exclusionary doctrines negate the moral significance of compassion and create what is in effect an expanded version of self-interest.

We ourselves are subject to our own historiography. We cannot emerge from it to evaluate another culture objectively. The intercultural dialogue should not be expected to produce agreement on a uniform set of ethical standards. I have not attempted to suggest that Buddhism represent any such universal system. Buddhism can, however, provide insight into the manner in which we can evaluate any canons of behavior which, from our current prospective, we would acknowledge as constituting an ethical system.

### 1a. Peace and Security

Desirous attachment sees the other as essentially desirable and seeks to draw him or her into one's possession or sphere of influence. Aversion, on the other hand, sees the other as essentially undesirable or even repulsive and attempts to remove the person from one's field of contact. Indifference is an attitude in which the other simply does not matter, and his suffering and joys are of absolutely no consequence. In this way our relationships with others are limited to the manipulation of a few individuals who impinge on the domain of our personal concern, and the ignoring of all the many others who fall outside of that domain.

The dominion of the ego in the emotional sphere appears most conspicuously in the weight of the unwholesome roots -- greed, hatred, and delusion -- as determinants of conduct. Because the ego is essentially a vacuum, the illusion of egohood generates a nagging sense of insufficiency. We feel oppressed by an aching incompleteness, an inner lack requiring constantly to be filled. The result is greed, a relentless drive to reach out and devour whatever we can -- of pleasure, wealth, power, and fame -- in a never-successful attempt to bring satisfaction. When we meet with frustration we react with hatred, the urge to destroy the obstacle preventing our satisfaction. If the obstructions to our satisfaction prove too powerful for the tactics of aggression, a third strategy will be used: dullness or delusion, an attitude of deliberate unawareness adopted as a shell to hide our vulnerability to pain.

(Bhikkhu Bodhi's Nourishing the Roots, Kandy, 1978: Wheel No. 259/260)

When we approach the issue of security from a spiritual perspective, we are directed to a consideration of the nature and quality of personal being. From a Buddhist perspective, security or the harmony between people and nations is conditioned by the internal harmony and tranquility attained by the individuals who comprise society. An individual in conflict and distress will often act toward others in a hostile and aggressive manner. Peace reigns in the society when each individual in the society is at peace.

Buddhists recognize greed, hatred, and delusion as defilements which corrupt human consciousness. The path to enlightenment entails overcoming these forces through spiritual practice.

It is apparent that greed, hatred, and delusion in their various manifestations are also the factors which generate insecurity amongst people. Greed leads to exploitation and subjugation; hatred promotes aggressive conduct directed against others. These are fueled by the delusion of the independent and individualized self, constantly striving for self-definition through acquisition and the rejection of the other.

Real security, pursued from the spiritual perspective, means that we must seek to improve our society by improving ourselves as individuals. This course of achieving social transformation as a product of personal transformation might at first appear an exercise in impracticable sentimentality, but I suggest that it is far more quixotic and utopian to assume that a radical reformation of social conditions can occur without a fundamental change in the attitudes of people. One of the great lessons of recent history has been that the restructuring of political and economic institutions will not in itself serve the cause of personal liberation. Until greed, hatred, and delusion cease to govern human affairs, they will find voice in any institutional structure and quell spiritual development.

I do not intend to suggest that the spiritual dimension of security would ignore the role of social, economic, and political institutions within the society. The injustices occasioned by these institutions should, however, be confronted as an aspect of spiritual practice. If I allow certain conduct, I implicitly affirm the maxim of that conduct. If I accept a system which serves to exploit or repress others, I reaffirm the exaltation of self-interest. This practice will clearly conflict with the path to liberation, which is grounded on the doctrine of anatta or no-self. For the Buddhist, personal and social liberation are merely different aspects of the same practice.

### 1c. Human Rights

Nonviolent strategies ultimately depend upon the moral authority of the position to predominate. If the enunciation of human rights abuses meets with indifference, then the oppressed will remain powerless. Accordingly, a correlate role for the human rights defender is to address the deficiency of values that allows for indifference in the face of the suffering of others. This introduces the spiritual dimension to human rights endeavors which has been present in every great human rights movement. If we look to some contemporary champions of human rights in Asia from the Buddhist tradition -- His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Maha Ghosananda, Aung San Suu Kyi, Thich Nhat Hanh -- we can see the effect of the spiritual component of human rights advocacy.

Indifference to the violation of human rights can only occur when individuals fail to recognize the interdependence and interrelationship of all beings. The lack of compassion with the plight of others can exist only when people maintain the delusion of the independence and self-sufficiency of individual existence. All communities have confronted the tension between the individual and common interest, and all communities have developed an ethic that addresses that conflict. In Buddhism, compassion is a path to personal liberation. The commitment to the well-being of others is deeply embedded in traditional Buddhist thought.

The human rights defender in Asia must cause societies to examine the values that inhere in the culture and to reclaim the underlying authentic principles of social organization that have in the present become obscured by consumerism and other forms of forgetfulness. The human rights advocate must work to reinstate the conditions of the moral order so that subjugation of others will not be tolerated.

## 2. Working Toward Global Governance

The effects of globalization are often assessed purely in economic terms. Advocates of the globalization of the economy often do not concern themselves with the effects of these policies on the distribution of resources within the country. Marginal consideration is given to an analysis of which segments of the society prosper and which find themselves further disadvantaged. The result has often been the creation of greater disparities of wealth. Furthermore, the extent to which this economic activity promotes satisfaction or despair is not deemed relevant.

As a Buddhist, I cannot consider economic efficiency as the ultimate value for a social order. I am constrained to evaluate a system of social organization in terms of its capacity to address human suffering, promote distributive justice, and allow for individuals within the society to realize their full potential.

I have seen the effects of the commitment to international trade in my country, where rural farmers have been convinced to abandon their lives of simple self-sufficiency and pursue the development of crops for export. They have often been unable to compete with larger and more efficient operations. Many have lost their land while the male members of the family have been forced to seek employment in construction or manufacturing in the city, earning about five dollars a day. Many of the daughters have been induced to venture into prostitution. The family unit and the community have been decimated in pursuit of international trade. This unfortunate set of circumstances represents a success story, to the economist who measures social trends in terms of enhancement of the Gross National Product. This social derangement and the concomitant destruction of the environment has been characterized as an aspect of the East Asian Miracle by the World Bank.

The globalization of financial markets has been devised in furtherance of these trends. In this structure it is the transnational corporation which becomes the fundamental economic unit. It comes to replace the village or the community as the matrix for human interaction. With the development of economic control comes a further transmigration of political power. The ethical values which are dependent upon an appreciation of oneself as a member of a community, with a responsibility for the welfare of others in the

community, cannot be sustained when the institutions which govern our lives are centralized and remote and preclude meaningful participation in the decision-making process.

Rather than the global economy projected for the second decade of the twenty-first century, we should seek the reinstatement of the community as the most significant social, political, and economic entity. With the globalization of the economy in Asia has come the incursion of consumerism, which is a byproduct of Western capitalism. Greed and waste have replaced compassion and sharing. Instead of focusing on creating an international economic and social order, we should look to our culture and the traditions manifested in our public life as a source of value. We should be aiming for small-scale, interdependent economies and decentralized institutions.

The centralization of power that has developed has deprived the individual of any significant control of his destiny. And while it may be true that power corrupts, so does powerlessness. It is only through the establishment of a public sphere, where one becomes engaged in the process of making decisions which will affect oneself and other members of the community, that one comes to recognize one's social responsibilities and the nature of human interdependence. The individual is not afforded any such role in the international economic order which emerges from APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) meetings.

The increased dependency of the Asian economies on international trade has created certain dilemmas which can best be confronted through an international strategy. Currently, the transnational corporation is capable of favoring the country that allows for the greatest exploitation of its workers and the most unrestrained degradation of the environment. Suppression of wages and of workers' rights has become an aspect of national economic policy for countries which perceive their comparative advantage to be the availability of cheap labor. The protection of workers' rights on a national level may prove self-defeating if it merely serves to cause the employer to relocate to a less conscientious country. International standards can be established and enforced to prevent corporations from forcing Asian countries to compete by offering the worst working conditions.

Similarly, environmental protection is a matter that can best be regulated by an international organization. The unilateral imposition of regulatory measures designed to protect the environment will probably result in business migrating to less restrictive places. An enforceable agenda to restrict environmentally destructive enterprise would prevent a country from having to sacrifice the environment in order to prevent businesses from seeking a less responsible neighbor. Given the current dependence of the Asian economies on international trade, a transition to alternative economic structures must be pursued carefully. Surely an economic system that truly promotes human values, that seeks to limit suffering and is committed to true democratic principles, will require more thought than a blind commitment to neoliberal policies. But let that be our aspiration for the next century: one that we will pursue mindfully and with skillful means.

## 2c. Local Initiatives

Bookchin, Illich and Schumacher have reasserted the primacy of small communities taking responsibility for their own condition of life. Across a range of disciplines thinking has turned to biology, the nature of

living systems, and to principles of self-organization as the only viable way to cope with change and complexity. . . . At the core of the idea of community . . . are three basic principles which are not only important, but also helpful in thinking about a more sustainable politics for the next century.

The first is the simple recognition of people's social nature, and one might add, of the sociability, sense of fairness, sympathy, and duty that evolutionary psychologists now see as hardwired into our genetic makeup. Two hundred years of history have done much to nurture institutions for freedom and equality, but very little for the fraternity and solidarity that hold societies together. Yet this softer value -- a social capital that enables people to work together, to trust each other, to commit to common causes -- has proved absolutely critical to societal success, whether in narrow economic terms or in terms of well-being.

The second principle is about scale. Community is deliberately a different word for society. It may refer to neighborhoods or workplace, but to be meaningful it must imply membership in a human-scale collective: a scale at which it is possible to encounter people face-to-face . . . [and] to nurture human-scale structures within which people can feel at home. Social science is ill-at-ease with such ideas. Strangely there is very little theory about the importance of scale and form in economics and sociology (unlike in biology, where thinkers like D'Arcy Thompson long ago made the connection).

The third principle is a reassertion of ethics -- the recognition that any viable politics needs to be prepared to make judgments about behavior, and about what types of behavior work against the common interest and against the interest of future generations. Without a strong sense of personal ethics, societies require an unacceptable level of policing and contracts; and without a strong sense of personal responsibility it is inevitable that costs will be shunted out onto the natural environment and onto future generations. . . .

(Geoff Mulgan, "A Sense of Community," in *Resurgence* No. 172)

In Southeast Asia many of the significant efforts at social and economic reform have been initiated by religious leaders from the Buddhist tradition. This provides a unique character to these initiatives as a consequence of the Buddhist recognition that social transformation and personal transformation are interrelated. One cannot meaningfully commit himself or herself to the common good if one is personally overwhelmed by the forces of greed, anger, or delusion. Likewise, one cannot find personal liberation if he or she is prepared to ignore the suffering of others. Thailand has provided exemplars of socially engaged Buddhism.

In Surin province in the impoverished northeast, an abbot recalled that when he was young the people seemed happier: they got along with each other, and there was the Thai zest for life. The villages were surrounded by jungles and elephants roamed freely. The people were poor, but they managed to produce enough food for their families, as well as the monks. They had the four essentials of food, clothing, shelter, and medicine. Over the last thirty years, the abbot had witnessed constant development and construction. Today, the jungle and the elephants had disappeared, and the people were suffering.

The abbot knew that something was wrong. Local products were going to Bangkok to multinational corporations, and then to the superpowers. He told the people, "Meditation must not be only for personal salvation, but for the collective welfare as well. There needs to be collective mindfulness. We need to look to the old traditions that sustained us for many centuries." When he started to speak this way, people

did not believe him, but they listened out of respect. He said, "Let us try alternative ways." He used controversial words, like "communal farming." In Siam, anticommunism is very strong, and if you use words like "communalism" you can be accused of being a communist. But when a monk who was pure in conduct spoke this way, he aroused the interest of the people.

He encouraged people to farm together and to share their labor with each other. He explained that ambition and competitiveness had only brought them more suffering. The abbot suggested starting rice banks to overcome the shortage of rice, and the temples cooperated. Whatever was cultivated that was left over was offered to the temple, where the grain was kept for anyone in need to receive free of charge. In this way, the traditional concept of giving alms to the temple was translated to address the social reality of today.

The next project he started was a buffalo bank. Being Buddhists, we do not like to kill buffaloes. So the temple kept the buffaloes and offered the offspring to those who could not afford to buy one. The only conditions were that the buffalo had to be treated kindly and that fifty percent of all future offspring would be returned to the buffalo bank.

Another local initiative was pursued by a Thai monk in Samut Sakorn province, one province away from Bangkok. Most people who live there are impoverished, illiterate farmers. The province is usually flooded with sea water, which perennially destroys the paddies, leaving the people with little or no means of subsistence.

Many of the people had been driven to gambling and drinking. Aware of the situation, the monk decided to help the people before making any improvements in his own temple or spending a lot of time preaching Buddhist morals. He organized the people to work together to build canals and some roads. He realized that poverty could not be eliminated unless new crops were introduced, since salt water was ruining the rice fields. He suggested planting coconut trees, based on the example of a nearby province.

Once the people of Samut Sakorn started growing coconuts, the monk advised them not to sell the harvest because middlemen kept the price of coconuts very low. He encouraged them to make coconut sugar using traditional techniques. With assistance from three nearby universities that were interested in the development and promotion of community projects, the people of Samut Sakorn began selling their coconut sugar all over the country. The monk has since encouraged the growing of palm trees for building material and the planting of herbs to be used for traditional medicine.

## 2d. Balancing Tensions

The binary opposition of forces suggested by this section heading is not endorsed in the Buddhist worldview. The bifurcation of human experience into individual good versus common good, rights versus responsibilities, entails a kind of dualism incongruent with Buddhist logic. Most significant, however, is the recognition that by enhancing the common good, one serves to diminish suffering, including one's own.

## 2e. Religious Resources for Global Governance

Any form of meaningful change must have a spiritual dimension. I have helped to establish various organizations which have confronted social problems from a spiritual perspective.

One of these is Alternatives to Consumerism, which recognizes the spiritual vacuum that engenders many destructive behaviors in the contemporary cultural setting. People are driven to accumulate goods as a means of self-definition. Discontentment is a systematic feature of the consumer economy. Individuals continuously strive to reach the next highest level of consumption and spending. A concomitant factor is the disintegration of the community and the values that the community propagated.

The purpose of establishing Alternatives to Consumerism was to explicate the manner in which the failure of spiritual values has produced the new demonic religion of consumerism. In international fora, the organization has sought to identify various manifestations of consumerism and to propose alternatives that are more conducive to true self-fulfillment.

The International Network of Engaged Buddhists allows individuals interested in Buddhist teachings to explore the social responsibilities that inhere in the practice. Through a journal and annual meetings, the organization coordinates campaigns to eliminate landmines, promote human rights, preserve the environment, and address other issues that reflect the Buddhist commitment to compassion and interrelatedness.

The Spirit in Education Movement reflects the commitment to the propagation of spiritual values in education. Educational systems that purport to be value-neutral in actuality propagate a distinct set of economic values. People are thought to pursue certain ends without consideration for their most important spiritual needs. SEM is an effort to reintroduce subjects that are truly significant to the well-being of the individual. Through regularly held seminars, these ideas have been propagated in Siam and elsewhere.

Kalyanametta is an overarching organization of various groups opposing the natural-gas pipeline which is proposed to run from Burma through Siam. Kalyanametta means "good friends," and the purpose of organizing was to demonstrate the underlying unity of the diverse efforts. Some organizations are principally concerned with the environmental consequences of the pipeline, while other groups focus on the human rights questions involved. The Buddhist ethic, however, provides a bridge and unveils the commonality of the undertaking.

It is this factor, the fundamental commonality provided by Buddhist thought, which informs all of these endeavors. It is what makes Buddhism a compelling resource for global governance.

### 3. The United Nations

The United Nations has proven inadequate as a means to promoting a just world order, for reasons endemic to its structure and purpose. Its members are nation-states which pursue their political and economic self-interest. The power of the organization is highly centralized and inherently unresponsive to the needs of the people. Individual morality is a product of the participation of the individual in the community and the concomitant recognition of the interdependence of beings. No institution comparable to the community exists to establish ethical standards for nations. No social order has evolved from which states can derive a notion of moral responsibility.

The members of the United Nations fervently preserve national sovereignty, which essentially places them beyond the control of moral imperatives. The UN seeks to enforce universally recognized values. It has operated on the assumption that moral standards have already been developed which only require enforcement through various offices. This neglects the constitutive function of the social order. A true community of nations must exist before a global ethic can emerge and a sense of international moral obligation serve to control the affairs of states.

Broader standing must be afforded to NGOs in order to transcend the nationalism of the organization and allow for a more democratic level of participation in the decision-making process. Alternatives to the UN, like UNPO (Unrepresented Nations and Peoples' Organizations) should be considered, where people who are unrepresented in the current scheme, such as Tibetans and those of East Timor, would be provided membership.

### 4. Developing Multireligious initiatives

Above I discussed some of the multireligious initiatives that I believe can be effective. I am committed to the proposition that human well-being is ultimately a matter that entails spiritual values, and that any movement which will fundamentally improve the human situation must address spiritual needs.