

Buddhist Contributions to Human Development⁺

*Tshering Tobgay**

Introduction

The birth, enlightenment and passing of the Buddha all happened in the second month of the Buddhist calendar, which is known in Sanskrit as Vaisakha. The Vesak Day has been known by different names in different countries and it has been celebrated for the last two thousand years by all Buddhists around the world to remind them of these three most sacred events in Buddha's life. Vesak Day is a great occasion for an international gathering to meet, celebrate, remember and learn from the life of Buddha.

Several global issues were discussed in the previous Vesak Day celebrations. In particular, the past Vesak celebrations have brought out certain future directions for all Buddhist communities. This year's Vesak celebrations will be similarly fruitful and stimulating, with its theme on Buddhist contributions to human development.

⁺ This paper is a keynote address delivered by Tshering Tobgay at the 15th Vesak Day in Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University Conference Hall, Ayutthaya, Bangkok, Thailand, abridged and edited for this journal.

* Dasho Tshering Tobgay was the Prime Minister of Bhutan from 2013-2018.

Bhutan's Spiritual Background and its Significance for Human Development

Bhutan is the last Vajrayana Buddhist Kingdom. Bhutan has been Buddhist continuously since the 8th century. In that long period, Buddhism has shaped its governance, culture, and lifestyle. The three highest teachers who left deepest spiritual imprints on Bhutan are the Buddha, Guru Rinpoche, and Zhabdrung Rinpoche. Guru Rinpoche is considered as the second Buddha because he brought Buddhism to Bhutan and the Himalayas from India in the 8th century. Zhabdrung Rinpoche, a monk, founded Bhutan as a nation in 1626, with the intention to make its citizens benefit from Buddha's teachings and to influence governance of the country by Buddha's teachings.

What is the state of Bhutan as a Vajrayana Buddhist Kingdom? Both private and state Buddhist institutions are still vibrant and influential. The support of lay people and the state is very strong for monks and priests. Society in Bhutan is still steeped in the tenets of Vajrayana Buddhism and the citizens of Bhutan are spiritual. About 80 percent of the Bhutanese are Buddhists; the rest are largely Hindus. Monasteries and hermitages are very active. Buddhism is taught also in schools. People spend substantial time every day on spiritual activity. According to a national survey on time use in 2015, people spent 36 minutes on average every day mantra, prayers and meditation and this daily average increased to two hours 25 minutes per day for those over 60 years of age (Centre for Bhutan & GNH Studies, 2015). People spend more time on spiritual activities such as mantra and prayers as they grow older.

Leadership

How has Vajrayana Buddhism influenced human development in Bhutan? What are Buddhist contributions to human development in general? As a Vajrayana Buddhist state, the main influences on human development in Bhutan has come from two sources: governance and leaders. Buddhism have influenced critically both the governance and its leadership in the country, and through these two institutions affected human development.

Let us take a look at leadership in Vajrayana Buddhist Bhutan. The Buddhist model of leadership has deeply influenced its leaders and our monarchs (Karma Ura, 2010). Historically, everywhere in Asia, all Buddhist monarchs have aspired to live by the ideals of Buddhist monarch. The exemplar of a Buddhist monarch is the chakravartin, the universal wheel-turning king. This concept of Buddhist ruler has been an inspiration also among Bhutanese monarchs. They have tried to live and rule from an enlightened attitude, as if following the original 'Ten Duties of the King' found in the Buddha's teachings: Ten Duties of the King that are applicable to any leader are charity, moral character, sacrifice for people's welfare, integrity, kindness, austerity, freedom from ill will, non-violence, patience, non-opposition to the will of people (Rahula, 1959/2001, pp. 84-85). Further, they have been inspired by the six far-reaching qualities advocated in the prajna paramitas consisting of generosity, discipline, patience, diligence, meditative concentration and wisdom. A chakravartin or a model Buddhist ruler is an agent of Avalokitesharva, the deity of compassion, with his thousand-arms and thousand-eyes. Avalokitesharva shines the rays of his compassion on beings sunk in sufferings and he creates the conditions of happiness and enlightenment for all sentient beings (Walter, 2009). This

is the vision of Avalokitesharva that leaders and government influenced by such a concept were expected to fulfil.

In Vajrayana Buddhism, at the least, a leader was expected to possess three qualities, namely compassion, strength, and knowledge. Knowledge here is more specific. A leader, a king or ruler must have knowledge of various kinds of suffering and how to bring its end. Other kinds of knowledges and strengths are by themselves not so beneficial, if not tempered by compassion and wisdom about suffering. Only compassion guides leaders towards benefiting all others beings consisting of both human beings and animals. In a world of increasing professional and intellectual diversification, a leader cannot be an expert in many fields. Regardless of a range of other expertise a leader might possess, the most central requirement for every leader is compassion. Practice of leadership driven by compassion towards both kinds of sentient beings is the essence of Buddhist leadership. Such leadership qualities found in our monarchs contributed to an enlightened governance in Bhutan.

Governance

But any leadership including Buddhist, however enlightened, cannot create lasting impacts unless the vision of a leader is institutionalized at the level of governance. In leading a society, all desired values need to be enshrined in frameworks of development and governance, with clear policies and goals along with a clear system of measurement of those goals and policies. And in a Buddhist state, the values that underlie its frameworks of development and associated policies should be broadly in keeping with economic, social, cultural and spiritual values of Buddhism. In keeping with the primary Buddhist understanding that all beings aspire for happiness and

Buddhist Contributions to Human Development

wellbeing, Bhutan's ultimate value is happiness, not material goal such as GDP. In Buddhist perspective, happiness should be built based only on wholesome mindful life, towards all sentient beings.

The ideals of governance that drew on both science and Buddhism for Bhutan was formulated by the Fourth King (reign 1972-2006) as GNH (Karma Ura, 2017). GNH is a development framework applies to official plans and programs. GNH is multi-dimensional so as to take account of the multidimensional inner and outer needs of human beings. GNH index, and the policies and programs that advance it, is based on the nine domains of GNH. The nine domains are (1) psychological wellbeing, (2) balanced time use, (3) community vitality, (4) cultural diversity and resilience, (5) ecological diversity and resilience (6) health, (7) education, (8) good governance, and lastly (9) living standards or material conditions. There is a profound interdependency between various domains of our life – and our life with the lives of others, including other sentient beings. Giving importance to health, education, good governance and living standards are prevalent in most development strategies. However, attaching equal importance to psychological wellbeing, balanced time use, community vitality, cultural resilience, and ecology are consistent with emphasis found in Buddhism for these domains, for wholesome human life. His Majesty the King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck has said that GNH is “development with values.” (His Majesty King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, 2008). Most of the values underlying GNH are aligned broadly with Buddhism. As an example, GNH measurement includes qualitative measurement of emotions such as compassion, contentment and calmness. It also includes measurement of mental stress and mental health. GNH indicators includes, as part of quantitative times use

measurement, duration spend every day on meditation and meditative prayers.

Happiness arises not only from material living conditions, but it arises interdependently from many other aspects of life. As all things arise interdependently, the cause of happiness should not be reduced to a few things. Human needs are diverse. They need a range of social, psychological, economic and cultural factors and these factors cannot be traded off with income alone. When a range of these needs are met, happiness arises interdependently.

GNH as a development framework is complemented by a GNH composite index and various indicators to track the impact of policies and programs. So, the implementation of the framework is to a large extent subjected to measurement and feedback from systematic surveys that are used for policy purposes.

GNH as a framework for development is currently applied mostly for assessing and directing official plans and programmes (Centre for Bhutan & GNH Studies, 2016). It leaves out the private sector. GNH cannot be effective if the private sector businesses and corporations that drive the economy do not reflect it. Globally, big companies generate greater part of GDP than national governments. Big businesses are often more powerful than national governments. Corporate giants effect the environment, communities, cultures and climate more than consumers.

In view of this, Bhutan is launching GNH business certification to be applied to businesses and corporations in Bhutan (Tshoki Zangmo et al., 2018). This initiative on GNH certification we have started welcomes any corporations abroad to join the

Buddhist Contributions to Human Development

movement. Normal businesses may stress profits, turnover and growth to the exclusion of other important concerns. But a business with a GNH perspective should minimize suffering and promote happiness of workers, and people in general. And it must neither destroy the planet nor sell cravings to the people.

Buddhist values towards environment and sentient beings have shaped GNH's high emphasis on ecological integrity in Bhutan. In Buddhist vision, not only human beings but all sentient beings intrinsically aspire to happiness and therefore merit contentment, security and peace. Human beings have a responsibility to preserve environment, for their own happiness and for the sustained welfare of other sentient beings.

When we look back at the accelerating global history of progresses made in human rights and freedoms, there has been greater and greater protection of human rights. Consequently, lives lost to wars, murders, and terrorism have fortunately decreased. But this is not the same picture we get when we take a look at the lives of other animals, both wild and domestic (Karma Ura, 2017). The number of lives of animals taken, often violently, around the world has increased on an immeasurable scale in recent history. Statistics of slaughter of livestock show that 66 billion farm animals and 84 billion other animals are killed every year (Occupy for Animals, 2017). Animals have the same capacity to suffer as human beings. They have psychological, behavioural, and evolutionary similarities with us (Singer, 2013). The welfare of an unimaginable number of livestock and wildlife also deserve attention of human beings.

Buddhism has moulded Bhutanese attitude to the environment and animals. Bhutan is one of the world's

smallest countries, but it has undertaken one of the world's heaviest commitments to conservation. Bhutan is a biological hotspot. About 5,000 plant species, 200 mammalian species and 700 bird species are found in a small country with its tremendous microclimatic ecology. The country has devoted 51 percent of its surface area to nature and wildlife reserves (Department of Forests & Park Services, n.d.). It has written into its constitution that it will maintain a minimum of 60 percent of its area as forest. Already, we have 72 percent forest coverage. Bhutan is the first country to declare its aim to remain carbon neutral. Bhutan's entire country generates only 2.2 million tons of carbon dioxide each year, but its forests sequester three times that amount. So, Bhutan is a net carbon sink, sequestering 4 million tons every year. Such conservation effort would not have been possible in Bhutan without a national consensus based on Buddhist values.

Buddhism and Human Development

What is Buddhist contribution to human development in general? Lord Buddha's dharma was ultimately about how human beings ought to live. His ethics of living took account of human existence that is riddled by impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and non-self. Among Lord Buddha's countless teachings, the teachings on ethics has been of direct relevance to human development. He or she develops when the way towards the cessation of suffering is found. As Lord Buddha has taught, this ability to bring about cessation of suffering depends on insight and analytic understanding about how human psychology works. The inability to see reality as it is, because of *avijja* or existential ignorance, can be a main form of blindness. Indeed, *avijja* means 'not seeing' or failing to be aware of the deep interdependence among all (Herschock, 2006, pp. 44-45).

Buddhist Contributions to Human Development

According to Vajrayana Buddhism followed in Bhutan, human beings' experiences of themselves occur through three gateways of experiences: through their body, mind and speech. Lord Buddha's teachings about behavioural, verbal and mental actions that would lead to happiness and wellbeing is the main basis of human development in Vajrayana Buddhism. Human development depends on advancement in these three dimensions of experiences.

As regards the body, human body is the foundation and context of any experience. A body's realization of its subtle energies and powers, and transformation depends on mind-body practices, from breathing, yoga to meditation.

Speech or sound is another door of experience. Sound of music, chants and mantras and sound of nature have tremendous bearing on perception and human wellbeing. Exploration of speech and sound that is healing and transformative is also a main door of human experience and path to human development. Above all, in modern society with increasingly powerful media, right or ethical communication has become extremely important.

In terms of mind as the third gateway of experience, in all schools of Buddhism, the first step is to experience tranquil awareness, aimed at clarity and mindfulness. The mind should be free from being captured by impressions or thoughts. The final vision, in Vajrayana Buddhism, is to experience a state of non-dual mindfulness, by practicing generation and completion stages. This stage requires tremendous ability of visualization.

Advanced practitioners and human beings are thus developed by a variety of practices that bring body, speech and mind to

its fullest potential. But for the ordinary lay people, Vajrayana Buddhism recommended ten virtuous to be followed and ten non-virtuous to be given up with respect to their behavioural, verbal and mental actions. These prescriptions were historically the main yardsticks for the development of human beings as well as societies in the Himalayas.

In Buddhism, development is ultimately interpreted as the development of the person in terms of spiritual and psychological aspects, once a decent livelihood is secured. Decent fulfilment of needs or livelihood can be defined objectively according to functioning. Needs are not relative. The causes of under-development and associated suffering lies largely in the under developed human spirit (Aris,1990).

Buddhist education and development are intended to enable people to have *vijja* or true knowledge through ability to see reality correctly (Smith & Whitaker, 2016, p. 529). In this respect, the Buddhist education is a process of overcoming the three poisons represented graphically by a black pig, a green snake, and a red cockerel. But dealing with three poisons is no longer an individual issue. Buddhist social critics have pointed out that we have reached a stage of institutionalizing greed, aggression and delusion (Loy, 2008), through business corporations, weapon production system, and misleading media and advertising.

Human Development Index

It is perhaps appropriate also to compliment and refer to Human Development promoted by the UN for the focus it has brought since the 1990s. In Human Development Index that is used to rank nations by the UNDP, the key components are income, longevity and literacy levels among the populations of

Buddhist Contributions to Human Development

member countries. These three constituent elements, including material progress represented by income, as important for human welfare, are consistent with Buddhism. But we should remind ourselves that Buddhism stresses that material progress should be accompanied by spiritual and ethical progress. The Human Development Report released in 1993 underlined the important caution that "there is no automatic link between income and human development. (United Nations Development Programme, 1993, p. 10). It is not possible to make a logical transition from high income level to high standard of living, and further to high level of happiness (Karma Ura, 1993). This is also the contention of GNH.

The Sufficiency Economy of Thailand

The Sufficiency Economy Philosophy conceptualized and promoted by the late revered King of Thailand is another example of human development approach that has elements drawn from Buddhism. Its three components consisting of moderation, reasonableness and self-immunity and resilience, which further depends on wisdom and integrity, are a prescription for people to live holistically. His late Majesty the King of Thailand has said, "Sufficiency is moderation. If one is moderate in one's desires, one will have less craving and one will take less advantage of others." (Broderick, (2013). The Sufficiency Economy's objective is to foster harmony and wellbeing for everyone in the society.

The example of Sufficiency Economy Philosophy in Thailand, in addition to GNH in Bhutan, points out how different nations are tapping into Buddhism in the contemporary world at the national level. And, many other nations have been doing similar things in their own contexts. Buddhism's popularity has grown over the past half century along with interest in

adapting it for applications in many spheres of human development. It is also most encouraging to note that applications of Buddhism for human development is taking place most notably at the non-governmental levels, among NGOs, civil society organizations, community organizations, religious bodies, non-profits organizations, universities, schools, cooperatives, businesses, forums, platforms, and many other forms of organizations. Buddhism is becoming once again socially engaged and focused on the creation of the public good as it has always been. It is already making major contributions in the fields of holistic health, environmental preservation, governance improvements, conflict resolutions, media reforms, consumer awareness, and so forth.

We face a challenging and troubling future with arms race, ecological collapse, climate change, addictions, inequality, unfairness, conflicts, and technological and institutional domination of human beings. Yet as Buddhist we remind ourselves that no situation is ever fixed, and it can be turned around. All future situations are also merely possibilities that changes with positive values and intentions. Buddhism has ever more to contribute to holistic development for all and all for holistic development. We are all in a flux of a direction, and the direction can be maintained by the three-fold qualities of prajna (wisdom), samadhi (concentration), and sila (moral clarity) in each of us.

References

Aris, M, (1990). Man and Nature in the Buddhist Himalayas. In C. Ramble & N. Rustomji (Eds.), *Himalayan environment and culture* (Pp. 85-101). Delhi: Indus.

Buddhist Contributions to Human Development

- Broderick, Richard (2013). *King by virtue reflections on the life-long endeavour of king Bhumibol of Thailand*. Bangkok: The Thai Khadi Research Institute.
- Centre for Bhutan & GNH Studies (2016). *A compass towards a just and harmonious society: 2015 GNH survey report*. Thimphu: Centre for Bhutan & GNH Studies.
- Department of Forests and Park Services. (n.d.). *National forest inventory report: stocktaking nation's forest resources (volume 1)*. Thimphu: Ministry of Agriculture and Forests
- Herschock, Peter D. (2006). *Buddhism in the public sphere, reorienting global interdependence*. Oxford: Routledge.
- His Majesty King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck. (2008). *Convocation address at Kolkota University*. Retrieved from <http://www.tsheringtobgay.com/monarchy/2010/leadership-of-the-self.html>
- Karma Ura (2010). *Leadership of the wise: kings of Bhutan* (2nd ed.). Thimphu: Centre for Bhutan & GNH Studies.
- Karma Ura (2017). The experience of gross national happiness as a development framework. In S. Mitra & H. Y. Jeong (Eds.), *Bhutan: new pathways to growth*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Loy, D. (2008). *Money, sex, war, karma: notes for a Buddhist revolution*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- Occupy for Animals (2017). Animals slaughtered since you have opened the website. Retrieved from <http://www.occupyforanimals.net>
- Rahula, W. S. (1959/2001). *What the Buddha taught*. Finland: WS Bookwell.

Singer, P. (2015). *Animal rights - the definitive classic of the animal movement*. 40th Anniversary Edition. UK: Open Roads Media, Oxford.

Smith, D. & Whitaker, J. (2016). Reading the Buddha as a philosopher. *Philosophy East and West*, 66: 515-538.

Tshoki Zangmo, Karma Wangdi, & Jigme Phuntsho (2018). *GNH certification*. Thimphu: Centre for Bhutan & GNH Studies.

United Nations Development Fund (UNDP) (1993). *Human development report 1993*. New York: UNDP.