BUDDHISM AND DEVELOPMENT

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1. Introduction

I often find it useful to divide our human existence into five spaces or spheres, something like this:

SPACE	GOAL
Nature	Ecological balance
Human	Health, enlightenment
Social	Development
World	Peace
Symbolic	Adequacy

Of course, any division, and drawing of lines, means cutting into something that has a certain wholeness to it. But I do not know how I can write, even think about anything without these tools of thought called concepts, and any concept draws a line between that which is inside and that which is outside. On the other hand, buddhist epistemology emphasizes the search for wholeness, and also the search for unmediated insight, trying to see our existence in an intuitive grasp, by cleaning the mind of unreflected baggage, of pre-meditated knowledge simply accepted because one has been told to do so, for instance in schools. A basic tool is meditation.

I accept that, but I also have to start somewhere from my own experience of the real world, and my feeling for the goals worthy of being pursued. The problems are as old as the existence of sentient beings capable of reflecting on their existence. But there is a nastiness to the problems right now, in our century. We are running out of that wonderful basis sustaining us all, nature - nature being unable to renew itself given the massive human onslaught on her. We are increasing our life expectancy, but also have a strong feeling that for the diseases we conquer (contagious diseases, and natural accidents) we substitute new ones (cardi-vascular diseases, cancer, mental disorders, social accidents - in traffic, industry, homes). Instead of develop-

ment there is maldevelopment everywhere, in the form of underdevelopment in poor countries and poor classes, and in the form of overdevelopment in the rich countries and among the rich in the poor countries. Where there is underdevelopment people have too little to meet their basic needs, where there is overdevelopment they have too much. And peace? Not much, most of us live under the Damocles sword of a possible nuclear war, with the threat of extinction. It may be objected that this is the problem of the North more than of the South, which is true. But the South has its wars, local-conventional, that one day may become nuclear. And the South is caught in the dialectics between terrorism from below and torturism from above - sometimes punctuated by acts of intervention from the superpowers, and by export of their conflicts.

All this is farily well known to any conscious human being on earth, although reacting to what is closest to him/her-self - as is natural. The big question is the problem of <u>compassion</u> for thos who suffer, everywhere, including nature, and that compassion is very unevenly distributed. Buddhism is an effort to extend that compassion to all spheres, all over the world. Of course, as a collection of words buddhism, like any other ideology/religion, is symbolic. The question of <u>adequacy</u> then comes up: does buddhism have a teaching adequate to these major problems of our world?

More adequate than most, I would say, and yet capable of being developed further. Thus, I think buddhism has a very explicit doctrine on human enlightenment, and that buddhist practice, through vegetarianism and abstinence from drugs of all kinds, and harmony with nature, offers a deep understanding of the human-nature interface. But does buddhism have a social doctrine? Does it really have a teaching on what to do, how to behave, what to aim for, in the social and global spaces?

2. Adequacy and compatibility

Basically, the answer to the question just formulated must be in the negative. The Four noble truths are essentially the formulations of a basic philosophy of life, and the Noble Eight-fold path, the pancha-shila (the five negatively formulated precepts) and the pancha-dhamma (the five positively formulated deeds) are essentially commandments for individual human conduct. A social doctrine calls for something beyond this. Some kind of social philosophy is needed, addressing itself to basic problems of social structure and processes, both at the national and international levels, in the social and global spaces to use the terms introduced above.

However, this absence of an explicit doctrine about the kinds of things that liberalism/conservatism, marxism, anarchism, brahmanism, Gandhism, Maoism and "Japanism" (I know no other word to descibe the implicit social ideology of Japan) are so explicit about, certainly does not make buddhism in any way irrelevant to the problems of development and peace. Concentrating in this paper on the problems of development, I think this conclusion of the fundamental relevance of buddhism can be arrived at in a number of ways.

First, what has just been said may be interpreted as a basic doctrine of tolerance. The Buddha did not say you shall make society this way or that way; what he said was something like this: make any social order you want as long as it is possible to live according to the precepts mentioned, inspired by the insight of the four noble truths and the Triple Gem.

However, and this is the second point, tolerance is a good guide because it leaves the field open. But what has been indicated above is that the field is not completely open. Social structures are strong, very strong and what happens if they are so strong that only a minority of individuals would be able to live according to the precepts, and that the rest would simply be forced by the structures and processes at the social level into highly non-buddhist behaviour?

To be concrete let me mention some examples. A social structure may generate so much poverty, down to misery, and at the same time so much wealth to the point of abundance, affluence, side by side, that it is hard to condemn the man in utter misery who steals something the super-rich has in excess in order to feed his starving family. Is that man to blame for stealing or are the elites to blame for upholding a structure so well serving their own interests?

Then, take another society where starvation/misery is not the problem but total repression of free, individual thought and action. There is not only action and speech police around, but also thought police - and the punishment for wrong action, wrong speech and/or wrong thought is very heavy, even death. A person who is caught, is responsible not only for himself but also for others, for instance his family. If he should lie when interrogated in order to save his life, who is to blame - that person or the elite upholding an ugly structure possibly serving their own ideological interests?

A third example: it may be objected to the first two examples that buddhists may withdraw into the Sangha and live according to the precepts at the price of marginalising themselves from the mainstream of a society they may consider incompatible in practice with buddhism. Possibly a solution. But what if society does not permit any kind of Sangha? What if every inch of territory has been mapped and planned for some purpose, capitalistic or socialistic or whatever; what if every second of time has been mapped and planned for each individual for some purpose? There is simply no niche in society where a Sangha may be carved out. Is that still a social order to be tolerated?

And thus one might continue. And one ends up with the conclusion that buddhism sets limits, lower and upper limits for social construction, but permits considerable variation within these limits. Development, then, from this point of view would be the construction of a society which does not make it almost impossible for ordinary human beings to think,

speak and act like a buddhist should and then, positively, develop further at the human level towards buddhahood. The question is, what kind of class or social orders could be both the cause and the consequence of a buddhist way of life?

Then, a third point of departure: the buddhist eschatology. Both Christianity and Islam have a utopia, only that utopia is not on this earth, but in paradise. Nevertheless, from the descriptions of paradise one might get some ideas about what the good society could look like, from a Christian or Moslem point of view. Can one do something similar for buddhism, would that be an approach to buddhist development theory?

I think it is difficult to answer a clear yes or a clear no to that question. Rebirth, according to buddhists, will continue until one is enlightened. An unenlightened life is suffering, transitory and empty. And the road to enlightenment goes via the insight into the Four noble truths and following the Precepts mentioned. If one now chooses to interpret nirvana as extinction there is not much to glean for development theory. On the other hand, if one chooses to interpret nirvana as perfect bliss, eternal happiness of entirely enlightened beings who then somehow coalesce with each other into a trans-personal Self, then there may be more to be learned. If this is the end and the means are located in the Four noble truths, the Eightfold path, etc. and if, further, there is no sharp distinction between means and ends, then there is some guidance to be found. Thus, in me it invokes a vision of a social order where basic needs are satisfied, where people are very close to each other, intimate, in union with each other, striving for ever deeper insights, ever more perfect wisdom, compassion, proud of accomplishing good. If love is seen as physical, mental and spiritual intimacy or union between two or more persons, then maybe love may serve as a metaphor.

I let that do as underpinning for the following exercise: what would be the minimum conditions a social order would have to satisfy in order to facilitate the active pursuit of buddhist values?

I think there are three relatively clear conditions, and I shall try to formulate them, but this time more in the language of socio-political discourse.

First, the principle of the middle way when it comes to satisfaction of basic human needs. The social order should be such that there is neither too little, nor too much of what is needed to satisfy the basic needs for food, clothing, shelter, health in a broad sense, and so on. In other words, the excesses of misery and accumulation of wealth are to be eliminated. This is not the same as striving for absolute equality, but possibly for narrowing the gap between low and high when it comes to distribution of goods and services, at least relative to many societies in the world today. Actually, I think this is an underlying idea in such different societies as capitalist Japan and socialist China - a puzzle that loses its mystery if instead one starts thinking in terms of buddhist Japan and buddhist China, referring to the imprint made during centuries - bordering on millenia - as opposed to the recent arrival of some doctrines from the west, however significant they may look. In this perspective even South Korea and North Korea start looking more similar. This is a similarity the Christian south and the Marxist north are very quick to deny, but it may nevertheless be apparent to an outsider in the light of the buddhist nature of that country so badly treated by history.

Second, there has to be a high level of individual freedom both in thought, speech and action. The life of a buddhist has been criticised for being too individualist, which may be true for some types of buddhism. But there can be no critique of the inclination of buddhists to penetrate ever deeper into the mysteries of the human mind, guided by the buddhist canons and whatever other guidance that might be found, helped by meditation and other exercises; but above all stimulated in the compassionate and maieutic dialogue with other buddhists - and others in search of enlightenment as well. The point is related to the point above: let people do what is necessary for the satisfaction of basic

needs; if they do not want more than the minimum of economic activity in order to pursue higher levels of identity, then let them have the freedom to do so. The buddhist search for wisdom cannot be planned, cannot be programmed, it can only be facilitated. Basically it is the individual cooperating with other individuals in search of the Unknown but not unknowable. In doing so, no question can be left unasked, no statement can be left unquestioned. Freedom is the sine qua non for this type of pursuit, the mysteries of the mind being unplannable.

Thirdly, I cannot help feeling that this can best be done in a relatively decentralised society, with small units. The higher the level of centralisation, and the bigger the social units, the more vertical they tend to be, the more the social structure tends to be on top of the individual and not the individual freely floating on top of the social structure. Also, the kind of closeness to other human beings that would be a condition for togetherness in the search for enlightenment, (through buddhist ritual, through an awareness of the common ethical budget based on the exchange of merits and demerits, through dialogues on these topics), might be stimulated by also doing other things together, for instance in the sphere of economics and politics. There is a two-way process at work here: buddhist thought, speech and action might inspire those spheres, experiences of the concreteness of social life might have a bearing on the life as a buddhist. At any rate, separation of the sacred and the secular, of religion and ordinary life is avoided - that separation usually seen as detrimental to either. Moreover, in such a de-centralised society, there could be not only one Sangha or type of Sangha but any number; letting a hundred Sanghas blossom ----

It may have been noticed that the three socio-political points just made are parallel to the three examples mentioned on how structures might counteract the effort to live as a buddhist. What is rulled out, then, would be exactly capitalist societies based on merciless markets that accumulate wealth on the one hand at the expense of misery on the other; merciless

socialist societies that through detailed planning prescribe every single action of individual life, even down to speech and thought; and excessively centralised structures, capitalist or socialist or both (the case of Japan!) that tend to be vertical and uniform regardless of what kind of ideology the elite might profess.

And that, of course, leaves me with the conclusion that the broad range of social structures envisaged by the contemporary Green Wave is most compatible with buddhist thought, and that buddhist thought, conversely, has a high level of adequacy when it comes to articulating development in social space in a "green" direction. This certainly does not spell the end to capitalist or socialist formations, except to the extremist versions, replete with excesses of misery and repression as described above. In more colourful language: neither the "dark blue" nor the "dark red" societies would seem compatible with buddhism.

I would, however, claim that this also applies to "dark green" societies, if by that we mean a social order which is extremely decentralised, consisting of very small units essentially living off the soil, very much oriented towards minimum satisfaction of the most basic human needs, and then the exploration of inner human space, in search of enlightenment. I think this is against buddhist thinking, not so much for reasons already expressed as because of some fundamental assumptions in buddhist epistemology. According to buddhist thought, nothing is permanent, everything is dynamic, relational, dialectic. This would apply to the processes in the human mind, and body for that matter; also to the processes in the social body and in the social "mind", the collective sub-conscious. A dark green society would tend to become static. It would not have built into it sufficient internal dialectic, and interaction with other societies. I see buddhism as both implicitly and explicitly favouring diversity, even within buddhism, and for all these reasons to be incompatible with a single minded blueprint for development in terms of the "dark green" social order depicted.

3. Conclusion: Is there a buddhist theory of development?

The answer is yes. But it is not very explicit, and should be made more explicit without becoming dogmatic. It might be pointed out what the doctrine excludes and what it includes. In doing so I think it is impossible for buddhists not to take some stand, and I have mentioned three: against excessive reliance on exploitative markets, national and transnational; excessive reliance on repressive planning, governmental and inter-governmental and excessive centralism. As indicated, I think this can be argued from a purely buddhist point of view, not invoking any particular (western) social and political doctrine.

Excluding these three excesses is not tantamount to declaring that all buddhists should join the green wave all over in general, and Die Grünen in Germany in particular. No such streamlining would be compatible with buddhism, or with development for that matter. What might be more compatible with buddhism would be the basic principles embodied in the middle way of satisfaction of basic needs (Gandhi' formulation: there is enough for everybody's needs but not for everybody's greed), freedom and decentralisation, which is tantamount to creating structures of participation, active democracy.

Finally, I see this wide range of social orders not only as a condition for the buddhist way of life, but also as a consequence. Let people lead buddhist lives, following the precepts, and there would be neither excessive poverty, nor wealth; no large scale violence, even less crime (the low crime rates of Sri Lanka). Decentralisation would come as a consequence of autonomy, of self-reliance. And if tolerance is really practised the danger of excessive self-righteousness may be avoided. In short: buddhism is a social ethics in search of a structure - and the structure is within reach for those who dare.