

THE NOBLE EIGHTFOLD PATH CONCEPTUALIZATION FOR A PEACEFUL WORLD

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to study the perspective of the Noble Eightfold Path, as a guide to peace in the world. The Eightfold Path is a path through which each individual can practice in daily life regardless of their beliefs, traditions, or religions. Its social dimension, the Eightfold Path includes the aspect of togetherness to attain peace in life and in social relationships. Buddhists, their role in the establishment of universal peace is addressed with the fundamental principle of Buddhism to direct the people from the path of destruction to the path of peace. This article concludes that the Buddhist worldview is surprisingly in accordance with the insights of studies on peace, its insistence on peace by peaceful means and a vital role in the efforts of bringing the culture of peace into existence around the world.

Keywords: The Noble Eightfold Path, Peace, Peaceful world

Introduction

The world today has become a small village in term of travelling from everywhere. We come to understand people from different religions and beliefs. Buddhists want to play a role in reinstating the virtues of peace in the world, we need to find ways and will need to cooperate with Christians, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, and those of other religions and ideologies.¹ Modern society carries many more dangers for the individual. We exploit science and technology for our gains and believe it give us happiness. The equation of technological development with social progress is perceived and we believe that a new form of happiness and freedom is arising. The clarification of thinking is essential so that one becomes free of the tangling confusion that abounds in societies.

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¹ Sivaraksa, Sulak, *Seeds of Peace : A Buddhist vision for renewing society*, (California: Parallax Press, 1992), pp. 110-111.

This is why the Buddha showed a way to promote peace to man and relieve him of sorrows which surrounding. It is known that Buddhism wants to establish world peace by means of the Four Noble Truths, the root of Buddhism. It consists the truth of sufferings, its sources, the cessations and the paths. The four noble truths are the basis structure of Buddhist thought and practice which support the change in the state of human mind towards peace in human life and help to in establish peace in the world.

In the present paper we propose to adopt the second approach. Consequently the present paper is basically a study of the teachings of the Buddha with a view to analyze how the Buddha approached conflicts. Even this type of exercise has to assume some states of affairs. For example, we have to assume that the Buddha dealt with conflict and was interested in solving them. It further requires proposing some new ways of reading understanding the teachings of the Buddha. We will have to work our way through the teachings of the Buddha in the course of this paper.

Buddhism and Global Societies

The Buddha's teaching, the Four Noble Truths: the first two truths discern the causes of violence and conflict and the suffering caused thereby: First: life inevitably involves suffering and second: suffering originates in desires. The third and the fourth prescribe the cure for this unpleasant way of living, that is, how to promote a peaceful way of living and live in peace. Third: suffering will cease if all desires cease, and fourth: this state can be realized by engaging in the Noble Eightfold Path.

To follow the Noble Eightfold Path is a matter of practice rather than intellectual knowledge, but to apply the path correctly it has to be understood. In fact, right understanding of the path is itself a part of the practice. It is a facet of right view, the first path factor, the forerunner and guide for the rest of the path. Thus, though initial enthusiasm might suggest that the task of intellectual comprehension may be shelved as a bothersome distraction, mature consideration reveals it to be quite essential to ultimate success in the practice, and the Buddha spoke about an ideal society: If people are righteous and mindful, using enlightenment as guidelines for their way of life, they can achieve the desirable society. O Bhikkhus, in the city of Varanasi there would be a kingdom named Ketumati, which would be prosperous, wealthy, and highly populated, with an abundance of food. O Bhikkhus, in this land of

Jambudvīpa, there would be 84,000 cities which would take Ketumatī as its model and guide. A righteous Universal Monarch would be born in this kingdom, and the people would live in peace and justice throughout the earth.²

Most people in modern societies in the west have little idea that what they refer to as Buddhism is actually a rich mixture of a number of different cultural and intellectual currents from Asia, Europe, and North America. The history of Buddhism is long and complex, spanning more than 2,500 years and, now virtually the entire globe. Moreover, it has an immense corpus of literature and many distinct traditions, each a product of the different cultures in which it has taken root. Therefore, it is inevitable that the adaptation of Buddhism to cultures outside Asia has entailed a highly selective appropriation of teachings, practices, and texts. In all of geographic areas where Buddhist traditions have emerged, the dharma has been understood in terms of categories, practices, conventions, and historical circumstance of particular people at specific times. They have shown a remarkable adaptability, taking on widely different forms in various geographical areas and transforming, absorbing, superseding, and accommodating local ideas and practices.

In the Buddhist ideal society, ordinary citizens also had responsibilities. The society could function only to the degree that the people were honest, moral, generous, tolerant, and confident. It was important that they be energetic, industrious, and skillful; live in a good environment; associate with good people; have a balanced livelihood; and make some contribution to the happiness and well-being of society.

The Noble Eightfold Path

The Noble Eightfold Path is known as the ‘middle way’ because it steers a course between a life of indulgence and one of harsh austerity. It consists of eight factors divided into the three categories of Morality, Meditation and Wisdom.

The Noble Eightfold Path leads to the cessation of Dukkha, to Nibbana, comprising eight factors in which an aspirant must become practiced, described as right way (Sammā), and the state of perfect peace that comes when craving is eliminated is Nibbana, the unconditioned state experienced with extinguished of the flames of greed, aversion, and delusion. The Fourth Noble Truth shows the way to reach the end of Dukkha, the way to

² Cakkavatti Sihananda Sutta.

the realization of Nibbana. That way is the Noble Eightfold Path itself. The Buddha said his teaching were “for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world”.³ The eight factors of the Noble Eightfold Path are:

- (1) Right view or understanding (sammāditthi)
- (2) Right intention or directed thought (sammāsankappa)
- (3) Right speech (sammāvaca)
- (4) Right action (sammākammanta)
- (5) Right livelihood (sammāajiva)
- (6) Right effort (sammāvayama)
- (7) Right mindfulness (sammā sati)
- (8) Right concentration (sammāsamadhi)⁴

The eight factors of the path are always accessible to us. They are mental components which can be established in the mind simply through determination and effort. We have to begin by straightening out our views and clarifying our intentions. Then we have to purify our conduct, our speech, our action, and livelihood. These measures as our foundation, we have to apply ourselves with energy and mindfulness to the cultivation of concentration and insight. The rest is a matter of gradual practice and gradual progress, without expecting results. Though right concentration claims the last place among the factors of the Noble Eightfold Path, concentration itself does not mark the path’s culmination. To reach the end of suffering demands that the Eightfold Path be turned into an instrument of discovery, that it be used to generate the insights unveiling the ultimate truth of things. This requires the combined contributions of all eight factors, and thus a new mobilization of right view and right intention. Right view is to become a direct seeing into the real nature of phenomena and right intention is to become a true renunciation of defilements born out of deep understanding.⁵

Peaceful

³ Clive Erricker, **World faiths Buddhism**, (London: Hodder Headline, 1995), p.55.

⁴ Peter Harvey, **An introduction to Buddhism: Teaching, history and practices**, (Cambridge: The Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1990); BhikkhuBodhi, **The Noble Eightfold Path: The Way to the End of Suffering**, (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1984), pp. 12-90.

⁵ Bhikkhu Bodhi, **The Noble Eightfold Path: The Way to the End of Suffering**, p. 12-90.

Peaceful approaches means, in the perspective of Buddhism, must include both the external behavior and the inner state of mind of the peace activists. In the Buddhist conception of peace, all causes of violence and peace are assumed and hence demand a multi-lateral comprehensive approach to stopping violence and promoting peace at all levels. One recent common trend in research on peace and violence is to explore the links between interpersonal, collective, national, and global levels of violence.

We are living in an age of information technology, but its innovations and accomplishments have not contributed much in reducing human tensions, anxieties, fear, sense of economic and social insecurity, mental disorders, hatred, depression and loneliness. These complaints of the mind, the heart or the soul, are a reflection of a kind of “spiritual sickness” which has wrong view and ideas as its base. We cling to our wrong views, and when we put such views into action, we get results which are regrettable. Buddhism in its true essence, is an ancient cure for modern day problems. In actual fact, it is not a philosophy in the strictest sense of the word, for neither is it speculative nor is it academic. It is unique in the sense that it lacks theological essence and it deals solely with actual personal and immediate experience. In this respect, it can be considered the only truly psychology-based religion, and it can function as a kind of psychotherapy, since it helps to create a mind that is ready for all eventualities and influencing factors, both from the outside and inside.

To achieve peace within a person, the Buddhist approach is to observe and reflect upon the conditions in the external and mental operations, and then to decide on the most appropriate course of action as response to the outer and inner environments. With the most adequate response, we would not do harm to ourselves as well as not harbor negative feelings and thoughts toward others. Before taking any external action to realize peace, the first step for any Buddhist would be to look at ourselves and the events happening around us carefully and honestly. The greater urgency placed by Buddhism upon the inner reflection finds its doctrinal basis on the Buddhist analysis of the roots of violence and conflicts within the mind.⁶

This is the starting point for the Buddha’s disciples to live in peace since peace depends not so much on what happens to people, but on what attitude, comprehension, and response they give to the events. An understanding of the complex set of plural forces, causes and conditions that

⁶ Suchitra Onkom, *Creating Sustainable World Peace*, (Bangkok: Sahadhammika, 2003).

have brought the event into being and have shaped our immediate perception of, feelings for, and reaction to the event, only becomes possible from the insight (Vipassanā) we develop from inner reflection in the light of the principle of dependent origination.

With a clearer view of what happened through practice of inner reflection, we are empowered with reactivity; that is, we no longer would respond compulsively, but would be capable of choosing a course of actions more appropriate and beneficial to all parties involved, with no anger or hate harbored within ourselves. The practice of right concentration towards common peace is the main obligation of the peace maker. Everyone should enjoy, be happy, and be steady in peace. This should be inculcated in humanity from childhood on that the desire for peace becomes a way of life to everyone.

It is the soundest path towards peace because it is based on understanding, thinking, knowledge, and experience of societies, as well as the development of a legal system, law enforcement, and the rule of law in such a way as to assure the respect for human rights and the cultivation of a culture of common peace in traditions, religions, societies, countries, and in the world. Without a culture of peace how can one be able to judge rightly that the course of action is towards peace? When the rule of law fails to put into effect the culture of peace it will abruptly disappear from the world.⁷

Many contemporary Buddhist leaders of peace movements give first priority to inner transformation within individuals on the path to peace in larger contexts. The Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh encourages people who would like to engage themselves in peace activism to prepare themselves in advance by developing awareness and mindfulness for practicing peace, that is, reacting “calmly and intelligently, in the most nonviolent way possible.” Inner practice on nonviolence is hence considered a prerequisite to peace workers and educators. Our negative emotions derived from the ignorance to the true operating principle behind all phenomena (including our own feelings and thoughts), the fear, anger and confusion in the state of mind, would rise as reactions to the adversary conditions, and would prevent us from acting nonviolently and living harmoniously with other people in the world.⁸

⁷ Ken Jones, *The new social face of Buddhism: A call to action*, (Canada: Wisdom Publications, 2003).

⁸ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Creating true peace: ending violence in yourself, your family, your community, and the world*, (New York: Atria Books, 2003).

The Dalai Lama advocated the “Middle Way” for Tibet: not full independence but self-governed by a democratically elected government, as well as a vision of Tibet as a Zone of Ahimsa. The latter refers to “a sanctuary of peace and nonviolence where human beings and nature can live in peace and harmony”. In this vision of Tibet, based on the guideline of ahimsa (non-harming), no manufacture, testing or storage of armament is permitted. What the Dalai Lama practices and achieves not only demonstrates a realistic alternative to the international politics but also provides a living proof of the feasibility of the Buddhist principle of peace in today’s world that is very different from the one Buddhism evolved.⁹

From the intrapersonal to the international, Buddhist approaches to peace at different levels can be well situated in an integrated model of peace building and peace keeping in the contemporary world. As the integrated peace is often criticized to be too much an umbrella term spanning too wide a spectrum, the feasibility to achieve such a vision of peace is doubted. The Buddhist approaches to peace can substantiate this model of peace by proving that nonviolence does work and can strengthen the beliefs that absence of violence is never productive without non-violence practiced at all levels of human activities.

The fundamental goal of Buddhism is peace, not only peace in this world but peace in all worlds. The Buddha taught that the first step on the path to peace is understanding the causality of peace. When we understand what causes peace, we know where to direct our efforts to. No matter how vigorously we stir a boiling pot of soup on a fire, the soup will not cool. When we remove the pot from the fire, it will cool on its own, and our stirring will hasten the process. Stirring causes the soup to cool, but only if we first remove the soup from the fire. In other words, we can take many actions in our quest for peace that may be helpful. But if we do not first address the fundamental issues, all other actions will come to naught.

The Buddha taught that peaceful minds lead to peaceful speech and peaceful actions. If the minds of living beings are at peace, the world will be at peace. The overwhelming majority of us live in the midst of mental maelstroms that subside only for brief and treasured moments. We could probably count on the fingers of both hands the number of those rare, holy

⁹ Pier Luigi Luisi and Zara Houshmand, *Mind and Life: Discussions with the Dalai Lama on the Nature of Reality*, (New York : Columbia University Press, 2011).

persons whose minds are truly, permanently at peace. If we wait for all beings in the world to become sages, what chance is there of a peaceful world for us? Even if our minds are not completely peaceful, is there any possibility of reducing the levels of violence in the world and of successfully abating the winds of war?

To answer these questions, let us look first at the Buddha's vision of the world, including the causality of its operations. Then, we can trace the causes of war. When the causes are identified, the Buddha's suggestions for dealing with them and eliminating them can be discussed and having developed a Buddhist theoretical framework for understanding the nature of the problem and its solution, we can try to apply the basic principles in searching for concrete applications that we can actually put into practice in our own daily lives. The state of "inward peace" is also a state of *perfect freedom*(*sammā-vimutti*), for the mind then ceases to be conditioned by the load of its past and the desires raging within it. It becomes master of itself. In the state of normal everyday consciousness we are finite conditioned beings.

In the past, peace used to be propagated as an absolute ultimate: transcendent, idealistic, and thus unreal, unattainable. People worshipped peace with awe but knew deeply in their hearts that peace is unlikely to be realized in this world. Nowadays, most peace researchers agree that peace is no more a stable state to be reached at the end of the tunnel, but a composite of dynamic interactions demanding continued striving because of the constantly changing conditions of all forces/factors involved. Therefore, in efforts to build peace, seemingly not directly relevant factors and conditions conducive to peace could be just as important as conflict resolution or other direct intervention measures in dealing with conflicts. This new way of looking at peace building and peacekeeping is in perfect accordance with the Buddhist view.¹⁰

The world's current crisis is due to our lack of a common view/vision towards our own countries and the world among political leaders, religious leaders, and the ordinary people. While the United Nations ostensibly seeks to promote one coherent world vision, its members either belong to the far left or the extreme right. The introduction of the concept of Nibbana in the West since the early days may also cause misunderstanding of peace as the ultimate existence in Buddhism. In some Buddhist branches, the state of Nibbana

¹⁰ Dharmachari Subhuti, *Buddhism for Today : A Portrait of a new Buddhist Movement*, (Cornwall: Robert Hartnoll, 1983).

equals with ultimate peacefulness or it is considered as an ultimate solution for conflicts. Since nibbana is extremely difficult to attain for almost all Buddhists, the equation (peace = nibbana) renders peace a remote, unattainable label that would not be conducive to any present peacemaking efforts. Along the same line of thinking, interpreting “*right concentration*” (*one aspect of the Noble Eightfold Path*) as being peace would be easily misunderstood to be that one can only stay in peace on the meditation mat, if without adequate background in the Buddhist traditions.

Conclusion

The Buddha’s fundamental teaching, the Noble Eightfold Path, contributes to peace-building and peace-keeping in the world. A Buddhist worldview based on the principle of dependent origination, its analysis of the causes of conflicts and violence, and open communication and participatory decision-making procedures in social organizations, would provide useful paths for theoretical approaches.

In sum, the central promise of the Noble Eightfold Path towards world peace is based on the ability of making sound judgments following the soundest course of action towards peace. The true value of nonviolence, compassion and altruism advocated by Buddhism would also inspire all people on the path of peace. Given the will, the insight, the perseverance, and the proactive creativity to realize the infinite possibilities latent in dependently originated reality, peace, from the Buddhist perspective, is realistic and achievable; and, aiming at making a more just and humane world, peacemaking is an imminent, common responsibility mandated by the interdependent nature of our existence and therefore to be shared by every one of us.

It fully fathomed the truth of the eight factors of the Noble Eightfold Path would provide useful paths for a theoretical and conceptual approach towards a peaceful world.

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