

GROWING CONCERNS OF THE INTERNATIONAL BUDDHIST COMMUNITY

By Ananda W.P. Guruge

There are ten areas of concern which require urgent international action, namely:

- (1) Peace, Human Rights and Disarmament*
- (2) Integrity of the Buddha-dhamma*
- (3) Studies, Research and Services*
- (4) Buddhist Values*
- (5) The Sangha's effectiveness*
- (6) Buddhist Women – their organisation and mobilisation*
- (7) Youth Power*
- (8) Disadvantaged Buddhist communities*
- (9) Protection of Buddhist monuments, etc.*
- (10) The economic capacity of Buddhist communities.*

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Ed.

International Dimension of Buddhism

The adherents to the noble teachings of the Buddha (i.e. the Buddhists) have, always throughout history, thought and acted internationally. National or geographical boundaries, of course, have no significance to a doctrine which was addressed to humanity as a whole and not to any chosen or privileged group. The Buddha moved from country to country and nation to nation and neither their political ideology nor their constitutional and administrative mechanisms mattered to Him. He was received with equal warmth by monarchs, who were already showing signs of nascent imperialism, and small but vibrant free republics which were struggling to preserve their independence. The Buddha Himself preached the ten royal duties (Dasa-rajadhamma) and the seven conditions of communal stability (satta-aparihaniya-dhamma) with equal emphasis.

With such a background, it is not surprising that Buddhism turned out to be the first Indian religious movement not only to spread beyond India's geographical frontiers but also to flourish in distant host countries even when its original source had almost dried out. The continuing international concern of Buddhists has motivated missionaries and pilgrims, teachers and artists, students and social workers to traverse thousands of miles over forests, deserts, mountains and oceans to propagate and study the teachings; ensure the stability of the Sangha; collect and disseminate the sacred literature; diffuse achievements and developments of art and architecture; take sacred relics and objects to safety; and care for neglected or oppressed Buddhist communities in alien surroundings.

The tradition continues with as much vigour as ever before, with an added dimension that the advances in technologies of communication and transportation have made the need for interaction and co-operation more urgent and extensive and the means available or mobilizable for that purpose more efficient than before. But what is yet to be noticeably developed is the WILL TO ACT.

Ten Areas of Concern

What really are the most pressing concerns of the international Buddhist community today? On analysing the resolutions of a recent meeting of world Buddhist Leaders and Scholars,⁺ one finds as many as ten areas in which they recommended urgent international action, namely:

- (i) Peace, Human Rights and Disarmament.
- (ii) Preserving the integrity of Buddha-dhamma through the prevention of distortion and misinterpretation.
- (iii) Studies and research and missionary services.
- (iv) Inculcation of Buddhist values and practices in daily-life.
- (v) Effectiveness of the Sangha.
- (vi) Need to organize and mobilize Buddhist women.
- (vii) Channelling of youth power.
- (viii) Buddhist communities in disadvantaged positions.

- (ix) Protection of Buddhist monuments and prevention of the desecration of sacred symbols and objects.
- (x) Improving the economic capacity of Buddhist communities.

In each of these areas are problems to solve, priorities to consider and action to be designed and earnestly carried out.

Peace, Security and International Understanding

It is but natural that the first and most important concern of the international Buddhist community is about peace and security and the respect for basic human rights. Not only the looming threat of a holocaust as an inevitable consequence of unrestrained proliferation of nuclear weapons but also the equally disturbing occurrence of rapidly accelerating armed conflicts in almost all continents, and mostly among small impoverished nations, demands action. Can Buddhists do anything more than appealing to the conscience of humanity? Even if one answers this question in the negative, it does not mean that any action of a moral nature to reinforce the peace and disarmament movements in the world is in any way a negligible contribution. In fact, this is one area in which Buddhists are best suited to take the lead. On the one hand, the doctrine of Buddhism has a demonstrated capacity to build defences of peace in the minds of people and, on the other hand, the history of Buddhism is replete with ennobling examples of men and women who found peace by eschewing arms. Two important recommendations emerge from this conference: *first*, to explore the possibilities of establishing a *World Buddhist Peace Foundation* for systematic study, interpretation, application and communication of Buddhist solutions to conceptual and operational problems relating to the survival and development of contemporary human society; and *second*, to exert influence to have an international convention promulgated which will outlaw nuclear weapons, in particular, and all other conventional weapons, in general, declaring armament to be a crime against humanity.

Oneness of Buddha-Dhamma

The next pre-occupation of the international Buddhist community concerns the threat posed, by distortion and misrepresentation, against the integrity of the Buddha-dhamma. It is a matter of deep concern that Buddhism is often admired for wrong reasons and criticised on equally wrong grounds. Underlying all later accretions, ritualistic overgrowths, doctrinal emphasis and alien, but tolerated, beliefs and superstitions is an unmistakably original core of fundamental teachings which remains amazingly common to all schools and sects. This is *Universal Buddhism* which unites Buddhists throughout the world whatever be

their sectarian affiliations. This oneness of Buddhism needs to be demonstrated through concerted action to withstand both well-intentioned attempts to compromise essential Buddhism principles in the name of tolerance as well as wilful efforts vilify Buddhism in organized campaigns to convert Buddhists to other faiths.

A major difficulty to be overcome is the tendency among Buddhists themselves to “caricature”, usually unwittingly, the lofty teachings of the Buddha either because they never have had opportunities to study their religion in essential details or because what they have been taught as Buddhism has been confined to peripheral aspects of ritual and sectarian traditions. The propagation of the knowledge of true Buddha-dhamma is, indeed, a vital necessity both as a means of ensuring the spiritual benefits of Buddhism to its adherents as well as to prevent them from being led away too easily. Buddhism appeals to the intellect and it subsists on intellectual pursuits of study, research and teaching.

Research and Studies

It has been noted that nearly two hundred years of Buddhist studies in the West have produced an enormous literature of translations, interpretations, evaluations and re-statements of the Buddha-dhamma. Not only were these done almost entirely by non-Buddhists but they were also executed with little or highly restricted access to dictionaries, commentaries and, even more importantly, the orally transmitted exegetical tradition. Thus these works of Western scholars need to be re-examined with a view to rectifying serious misunderstandings.

A fair amount of the research effort of Buddhist countries has now to be diverted to the correction of misconceptions, mistranslations and mistakes, which, as a result of the prestige attached to pioneering Western scholars, have been thoughtlessly reproduced even in the works of indigenous scholars. The urgency to have this task taken up immediately is redoubled by the fact that, in the competition for attention in the academic world, Pali and Buddhist studies, including the comparative study of Buddhist literature in different Asian languages, are visibly losing ground to other disciplines.

Missionary Services

Equally important is the need to reorganize and revitalize the missionary services (better known in Buddhist circle as *Dhammaduta* work) to meet the growing demand in the world for opportunities to study and practise Buddhism. This demand comes usually from a well-educated intelligentsia whose quest for knowledge of the Buddha-dhamma can only be satisfactorily catered for by

competent teachers of the highest calibre. The average Dhammaduta worker from traditionally Buddhist countries has little to help him in this task except his own dedication and enthusiasm backed by his knowledge of Buddhism as understood and practised in his immediate environment. His lack of a satisfactory command of the basic language skills required – not to speak of attendant competencies in communication as well as group dynamics and motivation – is a major drawback, while the lacunae in his knowledge of modern sciences (including social and behavioural sciences), technology, other religions and philosophical systems and current world affairs create further difficulties.

The training of Dhammaduta workers – both of the clergy and the laity – has been, therefore, underscored by the international Buddhist community as another of its urgent concerns. There is a need not only for building appropriate institutions for this purpose but also for developing supporting and learning materials in the form of literature, audio-visual aids and programmes usable through mass communication media.

Buddhist Values in Daily Life

In the propagation of Buddhist values and practices in the world, two main aspects have been identified by the international Buddhist community. The first, most interestingly, is *meditation*, which is central to the practice of Buddhism. With the fundamental Buddhist doctrine that the mind is the forerunner of all actions and conditions, the control of the mind, by itself, becomes the cornerstone of the Buddhist way of life. Even more significantly, meditation, as taught and practised by Buddhists, has the demonstrated quality of bringing peace and tranquillity of mind, the true basis of all happiness. To a world disillusioned by the pursuit of happiness through material progress, the promise of contentment and mental equilibrium which Buddhist meditation promises is indeed very attractive. The second aspect to be highlighted is the Buddhist concept of *human relations*, particularly in respect of the knottiest of all – the *employer-employee relations*. It is recognized that there is much in the teachings of the Buddha to be applied to the day-to-day working life of modern times to combat tensions and anxieties, violence and socio-economic disruption. Again, for the propagation of Buddhist meditation and the inculcation of Buddhist principles of human relations, efficient and effective mechanisms need to be developed.

The Sangha

Buddhists are fortunate in having a time-tested institution, which continues to demonstrate its viability and effectiveness, despite the vicissitudes of history it

has passed through. This institution is the *Sangha* and includes not only Theravada and Mahayana monks (and nuns), adhering to the basic rules of Vinaya, but also Japanese Buddhist orders, whom Riri Nakayama calls “Non-Vinaya”¹ on account of the dispensation of the rules of celibacy, as well as the Tibetan and Mongolian Lamas. Together, they can be a formidable force serving, at one and the same time, both their specific local communities and also the international Buddhist cause. Their traditionally recognized position enables them to play a leadership role. What they lack are:

- (i) adequate training, specially in modern techniques of education, communication, community development, etc.
- (ii) motivation, with strong lay support, to reach out from their currently narrow responsibilities to more challenging action in solving pressing problems affecting human development. To play a wider role, the Sangha has to organize itself internally.

The Organization and Mobilization of the Laity

The effectiveness of the Sangha depends almost entirely on the support and co-operation of the Buddhist laity. It is not simply a question of providing the material requisites – even though the sustenance of religious orders is of no mean importance.

With the wider range of experience to which the laity is exposed on account of both the educational opportunities and involvement in the world of work, the lay Buddhist has a complementary role to play in whatever is undertaken by the Sangha. In analysing the extent to which the laity is mobilized for this role, a very serious deficiency is found in that the Buddhists have hitherto neglected the mobilization of Buddhist women and youth. It is timely, therefore, that the Colombo Conference drew attention to this fact and made three specific recommendations:

1. that a World Buddhist Women’s Federation be set up at the earliest opportunity, with probably Sri Lanka as Headquarters, to organize the participation of Buddhist women in such fields as education, the prevention of crimes in society, juvenile delinquency, alcoholism, drug addiction, hospital services, health care.
2. that a Regional Council of Buddhist Youths be set up for the Indian Sub-continent and surrounding countries, which “have been nursed and nurtured by the teachings of the Buddha and where, due to the unfortunate circumstances of history, the Buddhist way of life has

disappeared leaving behind gigantic monuments of Buddhist art, paintings and literature”.

3. that Buddhist Youth Training Centres be set up in all countries under the guidance of well-trained, educated and disciplined monks.

The importance of channelling the Buddhist youth power to socially and individually beneficial and rewarding activities cannot be over-emphasized.

Solidarity with the Disadvantaged

The concerns of the international Buddhist community extend from these areas of developmental action to another in which its role is one of expressing, not only in words but also in actions its solidarity with disadvantaged and underprivileged Buddhist communities. While poverty and underdevelopment characterize the majority of the Asian Buddhist communities, there are several special groups which are experiencing hardship of varying degrees of gravity on account of recent political changes and decisions. The constitutional rights of the Buddhist converts in India, the aspirations of Korean Buddhists to re-establish religious and cultural relations between North and South Korea, the consequences of recent military and political developments in Indo-China on Buddhism and political and administrative decisions affecting Buddhist minorities in certain countries have been repeatedly brought to the attention of the international Buddhist community with the fervent appeal that its influence and good offices be utilized to seek redress. In this area, much can be, and needs to be done in the form of consciousness-raising action. Another facet of action in this respect relates to the organization of material assistance to displaced Buddhists who either languish in refugee camps or are trying to adjust to a new life in a host country. The latter group seeks, in addition, the co-operation of the better-placed Buddhists to perpetuate the Buddhist way of life in an alien environment.

Monuments and Objects of Art

The next area of concern for the international Buddhist community is the protection and the preservation of the uniquely magnificent heritage of art and architecture which the Asian Buddhist genius has brought into existence over the last 2500 years. The last few decades have seen very significant efforts being made by several national governments, sometimes with the assistance and co-operation of international organizations, to restore, conserve and protect most of the very important monuments and, at the same time, to develop their immediate environments suitably to recreate an appropriate atmosphere: e.g. Lumbini, Buddha Gaya, Anuradhapura, Borobudur, Pagan, Sukhothai. But still,

much needs to be done particularly where adequate measures are not in operation to protect these monuments and the objects of art from acts of vandalism. Particularly vulnerable are the movable objects of art which disappear into private collections and remain unrecorded and unstudied. Related to this problem is the desecration of Buddhist symbols (e.g. the use of Buddha statues as table lamp stands or door stoppers), the inappropriate use of Buddhist texts and names for commercial purposes, and the thoughtless comparison of any person seated cross-legged with the Buddha. These may do no more harm than hurting the religious susceptibilities of the Buddhists. But their prevalence only show that the international Buddhist community has failed to impress upon the average citizen of the sanctity which the Buddhists attach to the Buddha and the sacred symbols of the Buddhist community.

Economic Capacity of Buddhists

All the concerns of the international Buddhist community described above demand concerted action. But a very important question persists: namely, are the Buddhists economically capable of undertaking such a wide range of remedial and promotional measures? The answer is not altogether in the negative. Buddhists, comparatively speaking, are poor but they are not without resources. The recent history of Buddhist revival in several traditionally Buddhist countries reveals that some of the most ambitious educational, literary and missionary activities were accomplished at times when the economic position of the Buddhists was worse than what it is today.

What the Buddhists need is to mobilize the resources they possess through organization, training and management. In this context, the recommendations of the Colombo Conference relating to 'A Buddhist Development Programme', 'An International Buddhist Development Fund' and 'A Buddhist International Bank' are worthy of urgent attention. The Australian delegate to the Conference, in reporting his experiences to his reference groups back at home, evinced much enthusiasm and called this set of recommendations "*A Buddhist Colombo Plan*", alluding to an extremely successful effort in international co-operation which originated in the British Commonwealth Conference held in Colombo in 1950. Interestingly, the experiences of the Colombo Plan are most relevant to the implementation of these recommendations and the countries, which have to take the lead, are among the beneficiaries of that Plan.

Thus from a practical point of view, the improvement of the economic capacity of the Buddhists is a matter of the highest priority. But action on other concerns need not be postponed. A co-ordinated effort to pool human and material resources currently utilized, according to dispersed initiatives of dedicated groups and individuals can be most productive. If we need inspiration we have

only to hark back to the illustrious example set by men like Colonel H.S. Olcott, Anagarika Dhamapala and Enryo Inouye.

Conclusion

“*Ma nivatta abhikkama*” (stop not but progress) and “*Appamadena sampadetha*” (accomplish with diligence) represent, in the Buddha’s own words, the spirit with which Buddhists have to approach the many and arduous tasks at hand. The example of the Buddha’s life as well as His precepts and admonitions guide us to effort and action. The very fact that Buddhists have evolved mechanisms to analyse their problems and identify solutions is a major step forward. May this effort continue so that the word of the Buddha is propagated for the good of the many and the welfare of the many (Bahujanahitaya, bahujanasukhaya).

⁺ The Conference of World Buddhist Leaders and Scholars (Colombo, Sri Lanka, 1-5 June 1982) convened by the government of Sri Lanka on a resolution of the World Fellowship of Buddhists and attended by 162 delegates from 35 organizations in 17 countries. The report and working papers, edited by Jotiya Dhirasekhara and Ananda W.P. Guruge, are published by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Sri Lanka, in a volume entitled “Survival and Development: the Buddhist approach”.

¹ Ananda W.P. Guruge and D.C. Ahir (Eds)
Buddhism’s Contribution to the World Culture and Civilization, Maha Bodhi Society of India, New Delhi, 1977 p. 110-115.