

THE SOCIALLY ENGAGED BUDDHIST'S VIEW OF GLOBALIZATION AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

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How much healthier would all our societies be if they were based on value systems that truly advocated sustainability rather than unlimited growth! A society where people help each other out in hard times, a society where power is shared rather than fought over, that reveres and respects nature rather than controlling and using it as a resource, a society unsullied by the poisons of craving (*tanha*), and a society with values steeped in spirituality and wisdom. Concrete steps are being taken to manifest this vision through initiatives inspired by spirituality in general and Buddhism specifically. A good number of committed people are working on these initiatives. They do not have all the answers, but they have a clear awareness of the structural violence and a strong determination to work with the violence within their minds. They take the path of contemporary bodhisattvas, a path in the Buddhist tradition where one takes a vow to confront the suffering in themselves and in society in order to work for the liberation of all sentient beings. It is a very challenging yet enriching path, a combination of contemplation and activism, spirituality and politics, humour and seriousness. These committed people are returning to the very roots of the traditional Buddhist teaching and using this power to move toward a wholesome and sustaining future.

For if we do not develop an alternative path to the globalized consumer culture our traditional religions will remain at the periphery of the new dominant value system that reduces human beings to the mercy of greed. In today's world the desire to earn more and more money and consume more and more

unnecessary goods is a dominant force at the expense of spiritual growth and contentment.

Globalization indeed is the new demonic religion. It uses the media to create a sense of lack. Hence we are driven to earn more in order to acquire more, yet we can never reach a point of contentment. Consumerism and unlimited growth directly contradict the concept of environmental sustainability and technological advancements and can only delay the impending ecological disaster. This leads to the question of whether the whole international capitalist system from its institutions and structures, to its basic culture and ideology, is inherently defective. From a Buddhist perspective it definitely is. For if we follow the First World lifestyles there will be insufficient natural resources for all of us. Most of us will not be happy with a style of life that is harmful to ourselves, our family, our society and our natural environment.

In a 1990 talk, Vaclav Havel lamented that although we know a lot more empirically about the universe and the natural environment than our ancestors did, we do not understand their essence or substance as well. In many respects our lives have benefited substantially from advances in technology, but at the same time, we feel at a loss. We do not know where to turn. We become, have become, increasingly estranged from our lives, from the meaning of living. With a heavy heart, Havel concludes that the postmodern world teeters dangerously close to a nihilism where everything is possible, and where anything goes.

The basis of Western philosophy that dominates the globalized rhetoric emerged out of the Age of Enlightenment, when René Descartes argued that 'I think therefore I am'. Any being which cannot think was regarded as inferior and could therefore be exploited by those who could think. Even among thinking beings, the clever ones who can think better are in a position to exploit the weaker. Besides, the more we concentrate on thinking, the more our thoughts become compartmentalized. The deeper we think, the more we bury our thoughts and ourselves. We cannot see the wood for the trees. We are unable to perceive the world holistically. Hence the products of this

thinking and our experiments with matter, scientism and technology, cannot be questioned.

The world can now be characterized by the intensification and universal spread of an extreme form of modernity which devours all other forms of actualization of human beings. Technology and modernity uproot and destroy the traditional way of life and conception of beauty. Ugliness is supplanting beauty; as goodness is dimming. The quest for truth is now skewed by falsity and injustice, guided by money and power. All this is done in the name of being civilized and following the Western example. Science and technology are claimed to provide the solution to every problem. The fact that the latest technology may trample on beauty and goodness is easily and conveniently ignored. Scientific knowledge conditions humans to be like machines, and we perceive the world and the universe as only composed of matter. Matter is merely things. Things have no life or feeling. Hence we feel justified in destroying Mother Earth, cutting down trees and damming rivers. Self-reliance has immeasurably weakened; nature is raped and its diversity levelled; millions of people are exploited merely for financial gain or in the name of economic development. Human relationships are replaced by impersonal commercial, technological and bureaucratic connections. Modernization has increased alienation, distrust and fear among people, making it easier for them to be manipulated and controlled.

In the years ahead the corporate control of both human and nonhuman planetary life will broaden and deepen as bio-technology and genetic engineering are more widely used. Corporations are able to alter the genetic structure of common plants and animals and claim patent rights over or ownership of these modified products. Local producers, including indigenous people and farmers, have rapidly lost their rights over plants and animals that they have been using for millennia. We must be wary of green capitalism: that is environmentalism as defined and managed by dominant global interests.

To counteract these global forces, we need to take a different road from the one offered by international capitalism. One that does not exploit the earth or

any aspects of nature, for then nature will grow holistically, heal itself and help us human beings to grow physically, mentally and spiritually. All of us who are interested in freedom, justice, non-violence, democracy, and environmental sustainability should intensify our activism, criticism and analyses. We should not seal our lips, refuse to think and disengage ourselves from the sufferings in the world. The teaching we need in order to walk this path already exists. The challenge facing humanity is not the development of more and more technology, markets and bureaucracies but strategies for spreading wisdom and compassion.

We must realize that the real enemies are within us: the enemies of greed, hatred, and delusion. In other words, external enemies are merely just a projection of our inner fears. Once these internal enemies are overcome we will no longer have external enemies. All sentient beings will be our friends. There is no such thing as a non-relational 'I'; we all are interrelated and depend on one another. We should be grateful to all sentient beings, not only human beings. Without trees we will not be able to survive either.

Thich Nhat Hanh explains this interdependence in the following way:

'In one sheet of paper, we see everything else, the cloud, the forest, the logger. I am, therefore you are. You are, therefore I am. We inter-are. I know that in our previous life we were trees, and even in this life we continue to be trees. Without trees, we cannot have people; therefore, trees and people inter-are. We are trees and air, bushes and clouds. If trees cannot survive, humankind is not going to survive either. We get sick because we have damaged our own environment, and we are in mental anguish because we are so far away from our true mother, Mother Nature '.

As a Buddhist, I feel that the teachings of the Buddha have much to offer to mitigate the suffering in the world. The real meaning of the word Buddha is 'to be awake'. When we are awakened to simplicity and humility and aware of the suffering engendered by greed, hatred, and delusion, our consciousness is restructured. We become mindful about ourselves and others and are

naturally led to try to restructure human society. The restructuring of the individual human consciousness and the society is complementary to each other and both are desperately needed.

If I were to go to the Buddha to ask him for a simple magic to rid us of our modern predicament, contrary to Descartes' famous dictum, he would most likely suggest the following, 'I breathe therefore I am'. Breathing is the most important element in our lives. We breathe in for the first time as we leave our mothers' wombs, and we breathe out for the last time when we expire from life. Yet we do not take care of our daily breathing; we breathe in suffering, anxiety, hatred and greed. If you breathe properly then you don't rely entirely on your intellect. Your heart and your head link holistically. You learn to be more humble. You learn to understand yourself not dominated by the ego. The ego becomes less and less important. We will then have understanding and compassion rather than arrogant intellectual knowledge.

Only when we are conscious, we are able to understand the essence of mindfulness, which is the key to life. To understand life means more than knowing the sum of its mechanical parts, which is what we have been incorrectly taught. At least we should come to realise that we should not be living our lives for our self-glorification, for climbing the social ladder which abounds with injustices, but we should rather recognise that the downtrodden and exploited members of our society are no less important than us. We should also realise that we share a responsibility in protecting our natural environment, which is being incessantly destroyed. We should also learn how not to hate even those who are exploiting us, but we should instead overcome the existing unjust social structure which is based on violence.

Traditionally, the first part of training the mind is to achieve a state of tranquility (*samatha*). This helps to focus or calm the mind. This will allow us to plant seeds of peace within. Once we have mastered this simple breathing we are ready to develop deep insight meditation (or *vipasana*) which is an analytical method for exploring causal relations and problem-solving. It is based on a technique for understanding the nature of one's own

psychophysical constitution and of the world's. It develops into an internal factor for wisdom or right understanding by fostering detachment. This involves developing critical self-awareness (*yonisomanasikara*).

In this way we become less selfish and begin to look for peace and justice in the world, with a real understanding of ourselves and of the world. Once you know how to relate to each other, how to relate to nature, then of course you take from nature with respect, not aggressively. You take from your friend with respect, with friendship, not aggressively. We are no longer controlled by biased views of love, hatred, fear or delusion. Our magical formula could look like this:

'Let us meditate for world peace, social justice, and environmental balance, beginning with our own breathing. I breathe in calmly and breathe out mindfully. Once I have seeds of peace and happiness within me, I will try to reduce my selfish desire and reconstitute my consciousness. With less attachment to myself, I will try to understand the structural violence in the world. Linking my heart with my head, I perceive the world holistically, a sphere full of living beings who are all related to me. I expand my understanding with love, to help build a more non-violent world. I vow to live simply and offer myself to serve the oppressed. By the grace of the compassionate ones and with the help of good friends, may I be a partner in lessening the suffering of the world so that it may be a proper habitat for all sentient beings to live in harmony during this millennium.'

Meditation is used to enliven and nourish the mind. When we have learned to calm our minds there will be inner peace. We will no longer dwell in our monologues. We will be aware of the superficiality of sensual pleasures and prestige. Instead, we will be able to give birth to true love that is not centred on lust and possessiveness, which are inextricable from greed, hatred and delusion. In other words, only by reducing self-attachment will we be able to overcome or at least criticize the dualisms that inhibit our minds and lives.

Only once this duality is overcome will we appreciate the real states of the mind: compassion, generosity, sympathetic joy and equanimity. We will be able to perceive non-judgmentally and be awakened from the various forms of mental domination rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion, which are manifested by capitalism, militarism, and compartmentalized knowledge systems such as mainstream science. Meditation leads to wisdom; that is, the ability to know various states in their reality, without self-attachment. This will instill loving-kindness, and forgivingness in us. We will live in freedom. This will help alleviate or resolve the crises in the present world resulting from myopia and selfishness: obtaining short term gains at any cost. We can then see our society critically and meaningfully with a nonviolent and compassionate approach. We can then transform society to be peaceful and just, with environmental balance. We must overcome our 'selves' (e.g. the conception of a translucent, autonomous self) to overcome these crises.

I am not suggesting that the spiritual dimension of security can ignore the role that social, economic and political institutions play in society. The injustices occasioned by these institutions should be confronted in our spiritual practice. If I allow myself a certain conduct, I implicitly affirm the acceptability 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 no-self (*anatta*). For the Buddhist, personal and social liberation are merely different aspects of the same practice. The Buddhist tradition provides a clear and direct methodology for overcoming greed, hatred and delusion. This methodology is more definitive and realizable than any other proposals I have seen for changing the institutional base of society.

I will now move to the core teaching of Buddhism known as the Four Noble Truths, namely suffering, the causes of suffering, the cessation of suffering and the path to that cessation. If we do not confront suffering, we do not know the essence of suffering. Suffering that is both individual and social. What we call globalization or modern development does not show any understanding of the essence of suffering. Global development today appears to celebrate a

way of life that not only leads away from understanding this reality of suffering but appears to discourage people from even recognizing its existence. Global development, springing from Western civilization, claims to adore life but actually starves it of any real meaning; it endlessly speaks of making people happy but in fact blocks their path to the source of real peace and happiness.

Through meditation we become aware of the roots of social suffering on a basis on Buddhism's three main root causes of evil, namely greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*), and ignorance (*moha*). In narrow terms of interpretation, understanding the three root causes of suffering can help us to get rid of pain and disturbance in our personal lives. But in broader terms in the social context, they can really help us to envisage the causes and give hints about the ways the causes can be ceased.

In my view, consumerism and capitalism can be explained as the most important modern form of greed. With them, our values are geared towards satisfying the emptiness of our life by ever-increasing consumption and accumulation. By failing to understand the power of advertising we are at its mercy. This inevitably leads to conflicts of interest, and more importantly exploitation is justified by the concept of the 'invisible hand.' The lust for power, which leads to widespread human rights abuses, is a prime example of how hatred can manipulate individual minds and lure them to install an unjust social system in order to uphold the power of the governing elites.

Ignorance, another of the root causes of suffering, is largely caused by inappropriate education. Students are taught not to think holistically, but to compartmentalize their minds, and merely memorize useless facts needed to meet examination requirements. Modern education deals almost exclusively with the heads, not the hearts, of students. Often times, students are trained and equipped only with the skills they need to become employees for multinational and other modern companies, ready to exploit both their own countrymen and the natural environment.

Thomas Berry, a scholar of both the European and Asian classics, claimed that universities were 'the most dangerous institutions in the world'. They produce armies of economic rationalists and set them marching in a direction exactly opposite to where the real problems lie, programming them to do damage to society and the environment by pursuing rationalist economics and the so-called value-neutral science, while remaining oblivious of the moral issues and religious dimensions involved. The preservation of indigenous species of animals and plants, and respect for ethnic minorities, their languages and cultures, are integral to the functioning of sustainable ecologies without which life on our planet could not survive. Berry advocates that all universities appoint Deans of Morality (by which he probably means non-market morality) to ensure that these crucial questions of value orientation and practical politics be faced in all faculties.

Many would find this programme utopian, but the point is well taken: universities themselves are deeply implicated in a global process which puts rationality at the service of financial interests, and in so doing subverting the political process. Universities are corporatized, so to speak. Big money for big science for big business: this, despite a smoke screen of token appreciation for the humanities and the liberal arts, is the bottom line as far as university administrators who want to be successful are concerned. In the evolving environment of standardization, quality assurance and public accountability, it is a condition of universities' survival that they become, if not businesses, at least more business-like and business-orientated.

We must also challenge Scientism (not Science), which refers to the narrow-minded and dogmatic application of scientific methods to all fields of knowledge. Scientism developed out of the enlightenment period in Europe during the 17th and 18th centuries. Scientism is based in a reliance on the rational human mind to observe and understand all aspects of reality. As such, there has been a great focus on the material and quantitative, as what is spiritual and qualitative is often considered irrational. What is irrational is out of the bounds of scientific inquiry, private to the individual and ultimately of little value to the organization of society. Such a focus has given birth to the

idea of machines which measure or produce material quantities. Beginning with the industrial revolution, this mechanization process has not only transformed the way we produce and consume material goods, but also the way we view ourselves, organize our societies, and inter-relate. Scientism is misused in studying human relationships such as psychology, politics and economics.

I admit that mainstream science has benefited our world a lot, especially during the past century, but we must ask at what cost? For instance, our knowledge about the universe has expanded exponentially, we have gained some control over malevolent natural phenomena, and we can cure many diseases. It is possible to travel around the world in a few days (but only if you belong to the rich propertied class) and to communicate with others who live thousands of kilometres away. We often marvel at these accomplishments without considering the price we have had to pay: deforestation, the destruction of natural landscapes, the dwindling of non-renewable resources, the reduction in biodiversity, the concentration camps, and the weapons of mass destruction. We have to try to understand these bifurcations of reason. Only the few have access to these magical inventions, medical advances, and technological development. Those who possess these highly specialized knowledge systems are akin to theologians in the past: they have the power over life and death by determining our worldview, advancing policies that impact on millions of lives, legitimizing war and peace, and so on. These highly compartmentalized knowledge systems are often lacking an ethical component.

In the Buddhist tradition, all this suffering can be reduced or totally extinguished by the right understanding of the nature of things - Buddhism is unique amongst the world religions as its approach is not reinforced by faith, but rather by practice. Thus, to attain understanding, one has to experience the truth itself. Buddhism also gives me a sense of inter-belonging. With this view, I feel the inter-relatedness of all beings. It helps to internally affirm a common phrase among Buddhists that we all are friends in suffering. Globalisation does not acknowledge the essence and meaning of life at all.

Globalisation might be claimed to improve the livelihood of some people, but it ignores a true path towards true happiness, which is peace.

‘There is no greater happiness than peace’ (*Natthi santi param sukham*), so spoke the Lord Buddha. I am afraid that many of us do not believe in these words anymore. From a Buddhist perspective, for human beings to live happily there must be freedom on three levels:

The first freedom is the freedom to live with nature and the environment. We could call this physical freedom. This is freedom from want and deprivation: an adequate supply of the four necessities of life-food, clothing, shelter and medicine. This also includes freedom from natural dangers and the ability to deal with such dangers when they arise.

The second freedom exists in our relationship with fellow humans - we must have social freedom so that we can live safely together without being exploited by others.

These two kinds of freedom will not be truly effective if they are not connected to inner freedom - this is freedom on the personal level. Having physical and social freedom, people must learn how to live independently, to be happy and contented within themselves.

The most important kind of development is human development on a personal level leading to inner freedom. This leads to a happiness that is independent of externals; with it we are no longer dependent on exploiting nature or our fellow beings. We become more and more capable of finding contentment within our own minds and through our own wisdom, with the ability to be content independent of natural or social conditions. With a more independent kind of happiness, social and physical freedom will be preserved and strengthened. Human beings will then have the best possible relationship with both the natural environment and human society.

The Buddhist tradition itself contains a wealth of pertinent insight into exactly these issues. It is highly appropriate and indeed crucial that those Buddhists who are concerned with the welfare of humanity, spiritual, political, environmental and social, should join together to try and utilize the wisdom of the Buddha in a socially relevant way, by initiating alternatives to the mainstream. A Buddhist contribution to making our global society more peaceful and fair can draw on two main strands from its wisdom. Firstly, through an analysis of structural violence using Buddhism's rich tradition of exploring the roots of selfishness and violence within human individuals. Progressive Buddhists have been applying these teachings to social issues with increasing creativity, depth and practical clarity. Secondly, the Buddhist ethical tradition has often challenged the status quo of economic, political, and cultural power values and structures. The Buddha actually never referred to his teaching as being one that is entirely intellectual or entirely moral. He often referred to his teaching (*Buddhadhamma*) holistically, as a noble discipline (*ariya vinaya*). In this sense noble not only means high or great, but also all-encompassing. This concept of a noble discipline applies both to the monastic lineage and to lay people. One of the main projects I am involved in, initiated through consultation with HH The Dalai Lama, was inspired by this idea of noble ethical discipline. With help from His Holiness we are presently engaged in a progressive series of dialogues with Buddhists from various traditions expanding to other world wisdom traditions.

It is this kind of balanced approach that is also being used by the engaged Buddhist movement. Almost two decades ago, some of us felt a need to develop an appropriate role for Buddhism in the modern world. Some call it Buddhism with a small 'b', that is not clinging to any particular culture, school of thought, or country. Hence a Socially Engaged Buddhist movement was created to become a Buddhist liberation movement in Asia and beyond. This movement is applying spirituality, which has an element of intellectuality, of knowledge and personal salvation or wisdom, to social issues, the practical and tangible. This includes solidarity based on compassion and the appreciation of diversity. The International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) represents a first effort to link together socially engaged Buddhists

worldwide. The network is linked to the Buddhist Peace Fellowship in the U.S.A and with similar organizations in Europe and Japan. INEB deals with alternative education and spiritual training, gender issues, human rights, ecology, alternative concepts of development, and activism. I believe that the challenges and prospects for contemporary Asian Buddhists is to convey the teachings of the Buddha in an appropriate way for the 21st century.

What does it mean to be a Buddhist these days? We must find the appropriate light to interpret the teachings of the Buddha in order to awaken us from various forms of domination. We must understand the complexity of modern society, especially structural injustice and violence. We must ask ourselves what is the meaning of our lives: to have, to buy, to indulge, to possess, or simply to be? If we realize that the meaning of life is to be, rather than to have, we will know our role and identity in society. We will know how to behave to others and to the environment. Buddhist teachings from the past do not have power in themselves and cannot deal with the malaise of industrialized and globalized economies where transnational corporations rule supreme.

If we can bring the traditional teachings of the Buddha to light in solving modern conflicts, it can have a great effect on ordinary people. With moral courage, generosity and commitment to Buddhist understanding and practice, we can develop an extraordinary ability and can, in our own small way, become peace-makers in our time. I have already outlined the path for personal transformation leading to social transformation, but I want to emphasize that the future must be built on traditional wisdom and culture. The future of the world must not neglect the spiritual perspective. Despite being primarily a Buddhist network, INEB nevertheless has interfaith elements and seeks to consolidate the communities of those holding the same values and tenets of Buddhism worldwide. There is a wealth of wisdom that can be garnered from religious traditions.

As Buddhists we can learn from the Quakers, and also from the other religious traditions of Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, Islam and Hinduism. I am sure all these spiritual paths, including those of the indigenous peoples, can

help us to enrich our understanding and our practice in facing conflicts mindfully and overcoming them non-violently. The Buddha says a good friend is important for everyone. We need to have good friends, good companions and good friendships. We can learn from others to develop ourselves and to help our society to be peaceful and just, starting with ourselves. When we can transform our consciousness to be less selfish with help from good friends we can transform our societies to be free from human oppression and exploitation. It may not be easy, but it is possible. With critical self-awareness that helps us to change ourselves to be less selfish and to be non-violent and with good friends, we can look at our society and the environment with hope and encouragement to overcome social ills and environmental degradation.

For example, if we follow indigenous people's way of life, we can all live simply and have time to enjoy ourselves and to become part and parcel with the community as well as with our mother earth.

We should learn from the indigenous people about the wholeness of life and the sanctity of the natural order. We should learn to be alone with nature, to live with birds and flowers, to appreciate and respect nature. Through this understanding, we can realize that intellectualism and social engineering cannot liberate us from suffering. We need to return to the best of our spiritual traditions, to shamanism, mythology, traditional rituals, songs and dances, to experience life as it is available and alive in many indigenous communities. Too many of these are being threatened by corporate entities.

For corporations, natural resources are merely a source of economic benefit. When one area has been exhausted they can move on to another. The people are relevant only to the extent that they serve to generate income either as labourers or consumers. Money is less important for indigenous people. Of greater significance to them and us is to live happily with dignity, with a sense of the sacred, and with a spiritual dimension to our lives. This means to be in harmony with the earth, revere our ancestors, and respect our communities with a commitment to the generations to come.

Consumerism and unlimited growth directly contradict the concept of environmental sustainability and technological advancements and can only delay the impending ecological disaster. If we care for our survival, we must not only question the economic policies espoused but also policy structures that have emerged which are no longer accountable to the people. We must also question the legal and judicial systems that maintain the status quo. We need alternative economic and political strategies designed, like E.F. Schumacher says, 'as if human beings matter.' Indeed, we need alternative educational programmes which encourage us to integrate the manifold aspects of our being. Also, empowerment education for grassroots communities and individuals from all social strata providing tools to counteract these trends is crucial. We must be able to link our head with our heart so that we escape compartmentalization and develop the capacity to grow seeds of peace and joy within ourselves. We will bring about change through this process. Not by hating the oppressors, but by challenging structural violence. Through non-violence we can seek a transformation to create a just and peaceful world.

A relevant project for today that INEB works on is the Spirit in Education movement (SEM), which was founded by several prominent alternative thinkers to counteract the negative trends of Western education. From humble beginnings in Siam, working in rural communities, it is founded on the philosophy that education must be spiritually based, ecologically sound and must offer a holistic view of life. The philosophy is underpinned by Buddhist wisdom and green principles, but also welcomes and associates with other spiritual and ecological wisdom. We aspire to create an environment to awaken Buddha nature and cultivate wisdom as well as the intellect. We aspire to benefit people by increasing individual and collective confidence in their traditional wisdom, skills and heritage. We hope to move individuals from selfishness to compassion, from a lack of meaning in life to fulfillment, and from negativity to positive thinking.

SEM is just one example of alternative education and challenging the status quo. Tolerance for socio-economic diversity and alternative models of

development and education are almost non-existent. Formerly diverse ways of life worldwide are being eroded and freedoms, democracy, and human rights are destroyed. I humbly and sincerely recommend that these negative trends may be overcome by looking to our spiritual, religious and indigenous traditions. As a Buddhist I find transformation in the teachings of the Buddha. I want people world wide, especially those indoctrinated into capitalist and consumer culture, to see the Buddha simultaneously as the Enlightened One and as a simple, humble monk. It was simplicity and humility that enabled the Buddha to achieve enlightenment. This is the antidote that is needed.

By simplicity, I mean freedom from attachment to material and sensual pleasure. The Buddha, who wandered as a monk for six years before enlightenment called these the eight worldly conditions and stated that whoever is bound to them will never be free from the cycle of birth and death. Simplicity contributes to the realization of a noble life because it guides us down the Noble Eightfold path. Where consumerism holds personal material success in the highest esteem, one learns from the Buddha to constantly reduce attachment and to envision success as overcoming attachment to personal possessions. Free from these attachments, we have sufficient time and energy to nurture the seeds of peace within. From the Buddhist perspective, a prosperous person is self-reliant; has self-dignity, is proud of his/her culture; is content, generous, and mindful. Income and wealth are not indicators of prosperity in Buddhism as is the case with capitalism. With the right understanding of simplicity a peaceful life relates harmoniously to all sentient beings and to the natural environment. The five senses are not indulged through abuse of thought, speech, or action. We understand that consumerism endangers the earth's biosphere and strengthens transnational corporations that care more for profit than the well-being of people. We must be mindful of how to create and use wealth by giving to more than taking from others.

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, a renowned Buddhist monk and thinker in Siam, who died more than a decade ago, felt it was important for human beings to live a life close to nature; people should be friends with nature and not try to

conquer nature. His favourite saying was that the Buddha learned, lived, taught and died in nature. For him a good society was not one full of artificial artifacts that separate us from the natural environment. Rather, the ideal habitat for Buddhist culture to grow was in a rural environment. In his own life, Buddhadasa observed his natural surroundings and came to the conclusion that nature works in a co-operative way. To prove this to visitors, he always pointed to a big tree in front of his hut, where many small trees and plants grew together with the tree, along with a number of wild animals such as birds, squirrels, and lizards. He suggested that human society should be organized in this co-operative way. Nature operates under specific laws; the most important of these is the law of interdependence. So, he would say, as human beings we have to understand this and behave accordingly if we want to have a good life and good society. For Buddhadasa, the cultivation of a free mind, co-operative spirit, and living close to nature are practices in harmony with the laws of nature.

There is a growing movement of people who believe the same. And although it is clear that inequality and exploitation dominate our society there are movements across the world for peace, social justice and ecology. There are inspiring stories of people applying their ingenuity to protecting nature. In Siam, Buddhist monks preserve forests by ordaining trees into the priesthood. In Thai culture, ordained persons are much respected, so the trees are protected. Such creative resistance is also seen in the struggles of indigenous groups against deforestation and the damming of rivers; in the struggles of local farmers against biotechnology, and countless examples of people making a stand - however small. These struggles are full of passion, and need to be better integrated. Their common agenda must be firmly placed on a non-violent and spiritual path.

Through a spiritual context, life becomes a process of self discovery and self-knowledge through solitude, meditation or prayer, art and learning. Society becomes the way people connect and reaffirm their cooperative nature through proper partnership, family and community. Nature becomes the way all beings connect and this is practiced through a constant immersion where

environment no longer exists as a separation of man from nature. In this way, spiritual requisites extend the process of inner transformation and development outwards to society. This is the way we can overcome the violence and destructiveness of the dominant world order.

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