



BUDDHIST VISION TO ACTION STATEMENT
Revised June 2003

Preamble

"Buddhism has the characteristics of what would be expected in a cosmic religion for the future: ...it avoids dogmas and theology; it covers both the natural & spiritual, and it is based on a religious sense aspiring from the experience of all things, natural and spiritual, as a meaningful unity"

—Albert Einstein

When we enter the realm of ethical strategies for the planetary future, Buddhist teachings—in particular, the theories of co-dependent origination and interconnectedness—have much to contribute. For example, the doctrine of co-dependent origination proposes an interdependence between nature and human beings. Furthermore, Buddhist teachings maintain that the nature of the human psyche affects the natural environment, while the natural environment in turn influences the shape of the human psyche positively or negatively. These Buddhist doctrines and insights suggest that human beings mutually influence one another. What is more, human beings and the environment mutually condition and influence each other in the formation of the human psyche and of the nature of the world.

The Buddhist teachings on suffering likewise bear on the great ethical questions that face the modern world. Buddhists hold that the mindful awareness of suffering and its universal character produces compassionate empathy for all forms of life. The classic Buddhist ethical injunction to do good rather than evil emerges in a moral argument for the nonviolent alleviation of suffering.

In the spirit of awareness of the interdependence of all existence, engaged Buddhists work to meet suffering with compassion, to cultivate cultures of non-violence and peace, to advance human rights, to end race and gender discrimination, to end poverty and economic injustice, and to safeguard the Earth.

Evidence that the World is “in agony”:

The suffering of the world’s children is not the only problem facing the earth and its living creatures, yet for many it is the most poignant embodiment of the malaise that we

suffer. Over half of Earth's youngest humans live lives of hunger and thirst. Many more suffer from neglect, violence, and intolerance of various forms.

Violence grows on every side, often as a form of desperate cry against the injustice engendered by our systems and our lifestyles.

We humans have eliminated countless species, life forms that can never again inhabit the Earth. No matter how small or seemingly insignificant they might have been, their loss affects every dimension of the ecosystem. As we kill lakes, choke rivers, and fill our skies with choking fumes, we squeeze the life from ourselves.

Perceived systemic problem:

Greed, hatred, and delusion remain the most basic of all human problems. Many would argue that the challenge is greater today than ever before. Certainly the events of 2001, from terrorist violence to violent response, prompt a pessimistic view.

As Buddhists, we believe that our own community can productively engage in a deep reflection on our collective history, the normative interpretation of our deepest teachings, and a clearer understanding of what it means to be Buddhist in today's world.

As Sulak Sivaraksa has argued, "In making Buddhism more relevant for the contemporary world, it is important not to compromise on the essentials, such as the ethical precepts (*sila*). However, these ethical precepts need to be rethought in order to make sense of life in contemporary societies."¹ The Buddhist precepts that forbid the taking of life, taking what is not ours, and improper sexual behavior, for example, need to be rediscovered as calling for a new understanding of our Buddhist positions on issues from armaments to gender to poverty and global economics.

In the same way, every religion and every human institution needs the introspective gaze. How have we ensconced injustice and embodied "un-peace"?

Finally, ignorance of the radical fact of interdependence conditions human beings to a false notion of separation from one another, from all life, and from the Earth. In this isolation, compassion fails.

What is the vision of what the world can be?:

Buddhist philosophers have taken many approaches to the concept of interdependence. This may be the most important single intellectual gift to the world from our spiritual treasury. What does it mean to live in a world in which each choice resonates infinitely? In an interdependent world, the only meaningful "strategy" is grounded in compassion and solidarity.

¹ Sulak Sivaraksa, *Turning Wheel, the Journal of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship*. Berkeley, Summer 1994.

Although it is sometimes suggested or assumed that the Buddhist teaching of non-attachment precludes any developed Buddhist ethic of social justice or eco-sustainability, many Buddhist teachers and practitioners have maintained that the proper understanding and living of the Buddhist way of life demands a deep ethical commitment to the welfare of all beings, to caring for every member of human society, to justice, honesty, and generosity. His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, has written: “To develop a sense of universal responsibility—of the universal dimension of our every act and of the equal right of all others to happiness and not to suffer—is to develop an attitude of mind whereby, when we see an opportunity to benefit others, we will take it in preference to merely looking after our own narrow interests. But though, of course, we care about what is beyond our scope, we accept it as part of nature and concern ourselves with doing what we can.”²

The Buddhist vision of the world that can be found clear expression in these verses from the Pali Canon, the scriptures shared by Buddhists everywhere:

“May all beings be happy.
May all be joyous and live in safety.
Let no one deceive another, nor despise another, as weak as they may be.
Let no one by anger or by hate wish evil for another.
As a mother, in peril of her own life, watches and protects her only child.
Thus with a limitless spirit must one cherish all living beings.
Love the world in its entirety — above, below, and all around.
Without limitation.
With an infinite goodness and with benevolence.
While standing, or walking, sitting or lying down, as long as one is awake,
Let one cultivate Loving-Kindness.
This is called the Supreme Way of Living.”
—*Metta Sutta*

What could or should the world be?

The world could be the garden in which interdependence of all life is understood and celebrated. The world might be the field in which the great human experiment of compassion and service as paths to wisdom could come to fruition.

What is the good that can be expanded or encouraged?

The basic good is the inclination to enlightenment, the Buddha-nature as some call it. This finds its many voices in the worldwide call for compassion and care. That this good can be encouraged is found in the words and lives of the great spiritual teachers.

² Dalai Lama, *Ethics for the New Millennium*, New York: Riverhead Books, 1999, pp. 161-62.

What brings out our best nature?

In a familiar Buddhist view, our best nature is “Buddha-nature,” the innate capacity for and tendency toward enlightenment. Compassion and wisdom are the “most natural” states for the human being and for human society. If it often seems otherwise, that is our challenge to overcome; but we can face it with the confidence that human nature inclines gently toward enlightenment.

Why is there reason for hope?

From a Buddhist perspective, one can cite the growth of the social engagement movement within the global Buddhist community as a powerful reason for hope. From a broader human perspective, one need only cite the tremendous growth in networks of change agents around the world. Often inspired by religious visions, these innovative partnerships are a source of light in a world shadowed by suffering.

What should be done to reach the vision?

In the words of Samdech Preah Maha Ghosananda, we must engage the great challenges of our age, moving “step by step.” We should approach the critical problems that now face the world in the light of the Buddha’s teaching of the Four Noble Truths. That is, in each case we must (1) state the problem, (2) identify its cause, (3) clearly state the goal, and (4) describe the way to the goal. As we reflect as Buddhists on the problems that confront us all, we can express our commitment to right understanding by engaging with others whose expertise and concern can inform our hope and our movement toward peace and justice in the world.

In this effort, it is most important that religious communities provide examples. Buddhists should take responsibility to engage with others in creation of cultures of peace. It is a basic truth that lifestyle changes of the magnitude needed in the world today cannot grow out of fear or even out of confronting the evidence of damage and danger. Such changes flow forth from clearer vision and spiritual insight. Here the religions have so very much to offer. Most importantly they can offer their powerful example: let the world’s great religions teach by the quiet example of small communities, extended fellowships, and interfaith alliances.

Specific actions?

- Buddhists around the world should help to build, as the Dalai Lama has urged, religious and interfaith support for the efforts of the United Nations and its agencies.
- Buddhists must strive, as individuals and as members of the global Buddhist community, to articulate and embody the principle of universal responsibility. Find concrete expressions of universal responsibility, especially in the areas of social justice and care for the Earth.

- The worldwide Buddhist community will join with other communities and groups in the international effort to create “cultures of peace,” bringing the Buddhist concept of “being peace” in service to peace to broader attention and influence.
- Buddhist groups and organizations should rededicate themselves to working with youth in programs of training, meditation, and social service.
- Buddhist communities should join with other religious communities in focused and practical efforts to build cultures of peace.
- Buddhists have a great contribution to make in the area of service and teaching in prisons around the world.
- Our community must continue to support and encourage the international effort to ban and remove the millions of landmines that daily threaten the lives of poor people in countless regions of the world.
- Buddhists will pursue “right understanding” by engaging with other communities, groups, organizations, and institutions that are seeking to understand the causes of the problems of poverty, injustice, violence, and ecological destruction in the world. In the spirit of engaged Buddhism, we must identify attainable goals in the struggle against these hindrances to a peaceful Earth community and work with others to achieve them.
- Buddhist must broaden their participation in cooperative efforts, especially those involving other religions, to build a more peaceful, just, and sustainable world.
- We should work to spread Buddhist awareness, endorsement, and support of the such essential documents as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, *Towards a Global Ethic: An Initial Declaration*, *A Call to Our Guiding Institutions*, and the *Earth Charter*.