

CHAPTER 2

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BUDDHISM AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Abstract The attempt to study and evaluate development in Thailand within the framework of sustainable development raises the philosophical question of the extent to which Buddhism in Thailand might be amenable to the adoption of a sustainable development approach. I contend that a Buddhist approach to development affirms the core elements of sustainable development and so ought to be receptive to its implementation. In the course of my chapter, I briefly explain the basic ideas of Theravada Buddhism; the form of Buddhism in Thailand; isolate what I believe are the core objectives of sustainable development; clarify what prominent Thai monks and scholars believe are the limitations of traditional western liberalism; and, finally, suggest that sustainable development and Buddhism emphasize different dimensions of sustainability and hence can learn much from each other. Proponents of sustainable development have focused primarily on the realm of policy making and formulation of specific indicators to measure scientifically the sustainability of policies and practices, whereas Buddhists in Thailand have focused far more on attaining moral and spiritual awareness and have neglected the importance of public policy making. Both dimensions are essential to truly free and sustainable societies.

1. INTRODUCTION

The attempt to study and evaluate development in Thailand within the framework of sustainable development raises the immediate philosophical question of the extent to which a Buddhist society might be amenable to the adoption of a sustainable development approach. Non-Buddhist planners in Thailand face the prospect that there is a significant difference between their “western” values and the Buddhist values of the Thai people, a difference which purportedly renders problematic any attempt to implement policy in Thailand. This difference between philosophical orientations might be invoked to dismiss the interpretive methods and normative goals of sustainable development since these cannot possibly be valid or beneficial for a society with fundamentally different ethical and religious values. Indeed, the appeal to Buddhist values is usually directed as a criticism of the values of the west, e.g., regarding its philosophical assumptions about the true nature of human well-being and of a just and desirable society.

It turns out, however, that many of the salient criticisms made by Thai Buddhist scholars and activists of traditional western ideals of development are also advanced by proponents of sustainable development. Both are reacting to the social and environmental problems caused by “traditional” western economic and political thought, which is to be distinguished from the paradigm of sustainable development that has western roots but has resulted from a global process. Moreover, proponents

of sustainable development share many of the goals of a Buddhist approach to development, making it practically compatible with basic Buddhist values.

In the first section of this chapter, I explain the fundamental ideas of Theravada Buddhism which is the form of Buddhism in Thailand. In the second section, I characterize what I believe are the essential aims and methods of the notion of sustainable development. In the next section, I describe what the most prominent Thai monks, intellectuals, and activists understand to be “western” values and what they believe the limitations of these values are with respect to sustainability. It becomes apparent that their criticisms are directed at the very same traditional western values that motivate the recent notion of sustainable development.

In the final section, I describe the philosophical relationship between Buddhism and sustainable development and then contend that both western planners and Buddhists have much to learn from each other.¹ Western planners have focused primarily on the policy level and its implementation, including the creation of specific indicators to measure the sustainability of policies and practices. Buddhists in Thailand, however, have historically focused much less on the political realm of policy-making and devising measurement tools of sustainability; rather, they have emphasized moral and spiritual awareness and the meditative methods to attain these ends. Since the defenders of western sustainability recognize the necessity of personal moral or spiritual transformation, they could benefit from a deeper understanding of the Buddhist approach to moral and spiritual change and attempt to find ways to inculcate these ends in the populace through the various institutions of social life. Likewise, planners in Thailand could profit from the political and technical methods that sustainable development planners have created in order to formulate policies and assess their efficacy.

2. THERAVADA BUDDHISM

The following cursory treatment of the central tenets of Buddhism is necessary to understand its ideals of personal and social existence, which are the bases for a genuinely desirable and sustainable society. At least as early as 1250, when the Thai people broke free from the Khmer Empire at Angkor and set up their first independent state at Sukhothai, they have formally embraced the original, orthodox form of Buddhism known as Theravada (‘the path of the elders’), which originated in northern India c. 500 BCE and which spread in the sixth century CE via Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) to what is now Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, and Laos. King Rama Kamhaeng’s famous 1292 inscription at Sukhothai indicated the strong Buddhist influence on the king, nobility, and people of rank and the existence of a monkhood (Sangha) divided, according to the Sinhalese custom, into forest and town dwellers. The other prominent form of Buddhism, Mahayana, has been followed in the northern regions of Asia, e.g., in China, Tibet, Mongolia, and Japan. Vajrayana is yet another form of Buddhism that is practiced in Tibet and popularized by the current Dalai Lama. While these forms of Buddhism differ in some beliefs, practices, and observances, their core is essentially the same.

The essence of the Buddhist religion is to cultivate practices, and not forms of

worship, which respond to the problem of suffering (Dukkha).² Its aim is to help humanity achieve peace and happiness in this world (Nibbana, or 'Nirvana' in Sanskrit). Buddhism emphasizes the human capacity and responsibility to liberate itself from the hindrances or defilements --e.g., greed, lust, hatred, ignorance-- which cause suffering to self and others through the practices of morality (Sila), mindfulness or meditation (Samadhi), and wisdom (Panna). It is a non-theistic religion that rejects the worship of celestial beings and the necessity of performing external rituals and ceremonies, although in Buddhist countries there are ceremonies on religious occasions that express respect and gratitude for the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha (the Tipitaka, known as the 'three baskets'). Unlike monotheistic religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, Buddhism is not fundamentally interested in answering metaphysical questions, such as whether the universe was created or whether there is a soul which is independent of the body and which survives physical death; rather, it is a practical method to overcome the sources of suffering and to achieve happiness in this life.



Buddhism is based on the Four Noble Truths that Siddhattha, who became a Buddha (an 'awakened' or 'enlightened' one), expounded in his first sermon. The first truth is that to live is to experience Dukkha, i.e., suffering or dissatisfaction. All things, whether bad or good, cause some kind of suffering, and to recognize this is to detach oneself from them. Buddhists do not deny that there are satisfying experiences and happiness--the long-standing view in the west that Buddhism is a pessimistic religion is simply a caricature--but that suffering is inevitable and that even happy states, whether physical or mental, are impermanent (annica). There is, however, a deeper philosophical meaning to the first noble truth, which gives rise to the central Buddhist doctrine of no-self or no-soul (Annata). The notion of a real,

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