

Heavenly Abodes and Human Development¹

■ *Aung San Suu Kyi*

Although elected by a large majority of the Burmese electorate in 1990, Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi has spent most of the years since then under house arrest. In her lecture she expresses the belief that all peoples and creeds can co-exist in peace, that whatever their race or religion, all can learn to agree on certain basic values essential for the development of human society. She explores some of these values from a Buddhist perspective and highlights the kindly ties that can serve to bind humankind together in friendship and understanding.

The lecture is a sign of hope that these values will herald a future of human rights and democracy in Burma, a country where people are suffering gross human rights violations under the SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council) regime.

I would like to explore those Buddhist values which I consider to be crucial for peace and healthy human development from the point of view of an ordinary, imperfect human being with an ordinary, average knowledge of the religion into which she was born. I am not an authority on either Buddhism or development, but I am strongly concerned with the problems of human existence which fall within the realm of both subjects. In a nutshell, I am speaking not as an expert but as a concerned participant in the process of human development.

What do we mean by development? There was a time when development was measured purely in economic terms, but such is no longer the case. Now it is recognised that genuine development includes socio-political factors. Dare I suggest that true development should also comprise spiritual cultivation?

Sulak Sivaraksa of Thailand, known as one of Asia's leading social thinkers, describes the "spirit of Buddhist development" as one "where the inner strength must be cultivated, along with compassion and loving kindness".² He sees the goals of Buddhist development as "equality, love, freedom and liberation" and goes on to say that:

... the means for achieving these lie within the grasp of any community – from a village to a nation – once its members begin the process of reducing selfishness. To do so, two realisations are necessary: an inner realisation concerning greed, hatred and delusion, and an outer realisation concerning the impact these tendencies have on society and the planet.³

The qualities mentioned, both positive and negative, are not exclusive to Buddhist societies. It can be said that behind the materialism of developed countries lie greed, hatred and delusion. But there is also much of inner strength, compassion, loving kindness and strong support for equality and freedom to be found in those countries. The work that NGOs are doing right across the globe is proof that Christian development values are not so very different from Buddhist ones.

Buddhists speak of the four "heavenly abodes" or divine states of mind: *metta* (loving kindness), *karuna* (compassion), *mudita* (sympathetic joy) and *upekkha* (equanimity). A wise colleague once remarked to me that *upekkha* is well-nigh impossible for most ordinary beings; therefore we should concentrate on cultivating loving kindness and compassion, and sympathetic joy would naturally follow. Perhaps it might be well to mention here that *upekkha* means much more than mere equanimity in the conventional sense. It stands for a perfectly balanced state of the mind and emotions, a balance between faith and intelligence, between energy and concentration, between wisdom and compassion. It is non-preferential, without inclination towards excess in any direction. It is therefore understandable why *upekkha* is beyond the attainment of ordinary human beings with just ordinary capacities for controlling their minds and emotions. The other heavenly abodes, however, are well within our reach and germane to the ideal type of development, whether termed Christian or Buddhist.

The first of the heavenly abodes, *metta*, loving kindness, plays a crucial part in the process of human development. While Buddhists speak of *metta*, Christians speak of Christian love.

Both refer to disinterested love, a love that seeks to give and to serve, rather than to take and demand. Inherent in the concept of this kind of love is understanding, sympathy, forgiveness and courage. A Saint Damian or a Mother Teresa gave tender care, for “the love of Christ”, to those whom humanity in general find physically repugnant, because Jesus had shown love and kindness towards the rejects of society, the lepers and the insane, the sick and the lame.

The Lord Buddha too set examples for the practical application of loving kindness. Once when the Lord Buddha and his cousin Ananda came across a sick monk lying in his own filth they washed him and tended him. Then the Lord Buddha called the other monks together, admonished them for neglecting their sick brethren and taught them that it was more important to care for the sick than to tend to him, the Buddha himself.⁴ At another time the Lord Buddha, in the face of the protests of his entourage, caused a young woman who had gone mad with grief to be brought before him that he might teach her how to achieve inner peace.⁵ Such episodes demonstrate that the impulse of loving kindness lies behind what might be termed humanitarian labour.

Development projects should essentially be humanitarian labour on varying scales. Whether it is distributing milk powder to malnourished children or building a mega-dam, it should be done with people in mind, people who need the balm of loving kindness to withstand the rigours of human existence. Projects undertaken for the sake of upping statistics or for love of grandiosity or praise, rather than for the love of live human beings with bodies that can be hurt, minds that can be damaged and hearts that can be bruised, seldom succeed in fostering the kind of development that enhances the quality of life.

His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama is surely one of the leading authorities and practitioners of loving kindness in our world today. He teaches us that:

... we are not lacking in terms of the development of science and technology; still, we lack something here in the heart – real inner warm feeling. A good heart is needed.... The problems human society is facing in terms of economic development, the crisis of energy, the tension between the poor and rich nations, and many geopolitical problems can be solved if we understand each others’ fundamental humanity, respect each others’ rights, share each others’ problems and sufferings, and then make joint efforts.... Things and events

depend heavily on motivation. A real sense of appreciation of humanity, compassion and love are the key points. If we develop a good heart, then whether the field is science, agriculture, or politics, since motivation is so very important, these will all improve.⁶

One might say then that true human development includes the development of loving kindness. In speaking of charitable institutions and charitable works today, it is too often forgotten that the root of the word “charity” is from the Latin *carus*, “dear”, that in fact charity means love. Most appropriately, in the Burmese-language version of the Holy Bible, “charity” is translated as *metta*. Might not the words of St. Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians be seen as a guide to the best kind of development for all human beings, whatever their religion?

And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.

And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.

Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up.

Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil;

Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away.

And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.⁷

No amount of money or technical expertise or scientific knowledge or industry or vision can make up for lack of love. There is nothing patronising or self-satisfied about true charity, nothing callous or unthinking. Where there is love, there can be neither complacency nor indifference to the effect of one’s actions. Development planning and projects arising out of love will be based on “the wish that other human beings should enjoy internal and external safety, mental and physical happiness,

and ease of well-being”,⁸ not on a desire for professional satisfaction or kudos. That is why, as true charity “never faileth”, development that is directed by loving kindness can seldom fail to help those really in need.

CAFOD’s clarion declaration that it is “on the side of people in need” instantly creates a bond between us. Once during my years of house arrest, one of the people who were – shall we say, “taking care of me”? – said in an accusing tone that I was always “on the side of the people”. Yes, I said, that was so, because I would always stand by those who were weaker; they were the ones who needed support. But, came the query, what if the weaker side were in the wrong? In that case, I replied, I would try to correct them with *metta*. The only response to this was a somewhat pained smile. But later I asked myself what one would do if *metta* did not succeed in correcting those who were weak but quite patently in the wrong. The conclusion at which I arrived was that one would have to work at perfecting one’s *metta* because perfect *metta* cannot fail.

But is there not a danger of overstating the case for loving kindness? Could there not be cases of loving not wisely but too well? Not so, if it is perfect *metta*, because it implies an innate sense of balance, it is equally directed to all beings to the point that there is no discrimination between the self and others. It is charity beginning at home in the best possible sense. In practising Buddhist *metta* meditation, we start by directing *metta* towards ourselves, wishing that we might be happy and at peace, and recognising that as one wants to be happy, so too other beings want to be happy. Then we direct *metta* towards our benefactors, those who have helped us. Then we move on to loved ones. (One does not begin *metta* meditation by directing one’s attention towards those whom one loves too much because often implicit in the “too much” is attachment, which has been described as the “near enemy of love”, for while love “allows and honours and appreciates”, attachment “grasps and holds and seeks to possess”.⁹ From loved ones we proceed to those whom we regard with negative emotions. Successful *metta* meditation should result in a state of mind that embraces all beings with loving kindness, favouring neither oneself nor others.

But then what about self-sacrifice which demands that one puts others before oneself? The work of relief and development agencies often involves a certain degree of self-sacrifice, This is where compassion, the second of the heavenly abodes, comes in. What causes men and women to leave comfortable homes and

give up lucrative positions to go out to bleak, even devastated lands for the sake of bringing relief to peoples of an alien race and creed? The motivating factor is surely compassion, which has been defined as “the quivering of the heart in response to others’ suffering, the wish to remove painful circumstances from the lives of other beings”.¹⁰ It is one of the two aspects of *bodhicitta*, “the thought of enlightenment”. A Tibetan yogin wrote the following poem on the fundamental link between compassion and the *dharma*, that is the teachings of the Buddha:

If a man has compassion, he is the Buddha;
Without compassion, he is the Lord of Death.

With compassion, the root of Dharma is planted,
Without compassion, the root of Dharma is rotten.

One with compassion is kind even when angry,
One without compassion kills even as he smiles.

For one with compassion, even enemies turn into friends,
Without compassion, even friends turn into enemies.

With compassion one has all Dharmas,
Without compassion, one is worse than profane.

Even meditating on voidness, one needs compassion as its
essence,
A Dharma practitioner must have a compassionate nature.

Great compassion is like a wish-fulfilling gem.
Great compassion fulfills the hopes of self and others.

Therefore, all of you, renunciants and householders,
Cultivate compassion and you will achieve Buddhahood.¹¹

There is a solid core of common sense to Buddhist teachings. That is why compassion is but one aspect of *bodhicitta*; the other aspect is wisdom. Compassion must be balanced by wisdom and wisdom must be balanced by compassion. This balance is essential that there might be harmony and that one might be able to make correct decisions for the general good. There are a number of Buddhist stories that illustrate the need for a healthy balance between compassion and wisdom. Of these stories, the following is one that I find most appealing.

Once there lived a dragon at the foot of the Himalayas, a fierce dragon king that breathed fire and smoke and reduced creatures to ashes with his incendiary glare. He was not unnaturally the terror of all who dwelled in the region. One day while the dragon was in one of his less amicable moods, a *bodhisattva* came by. The dragon king proceeded to give a fine display of his propensity for violence, no doubt imagining that he would succeed in terrifying the holy one (not that the dragon understood anything of holiness) before reducing him to ashes. To his surprise, the *bodhisattva* showed no fear or apprehension but instead gave him a brief sermon on the joys of non-violence and compassion. The dragon king was instantly converted to the path of non-violence and decided that he would never again harm any being under any circumstances.

Now in an ideal world, that should be the happy end of the story. But ours is not an ideal world; it is a world conditioned by impermanence, suffering and the unresponsiveness of objects to one's wishes. When it dawned on the children who lived within the vicinity of the dragon's lair that the fire breathing monster had ceased to bristle with pyrotechnic ferocity, they began to approach it cautiously. Their confidence grew until they felt bold enough to touch the dragon king. On finding how docile and patient the dragon had become, the children handled it more roughly. Eventually the children got into the habit of ill-treating the dragon, making life a misery for him. When the *bodhisattva* came by again, the dragon king complained of how unhappy he had been since following the path of non-violence. The *bodhisattva* replied that this had come about because the dragon had not balanced compassion with wisdom: when the children become unruly, he should show his fire to stop them from proceeding to cruel acts. The dragon king's failure to balance compassion with wisdom had been harmful both to himself and to the children, who had been turned into little bullies by his excessive forbearance.

In an ideal world, the kind of world which we would like to develop, compassion would be met with compassion: as the dragon king became tame, the children would have become tender. But that is not always how it happens. One hears of cases where too kindly social workers are exploited by the people of the communities in which they work. One also hears of cases where parents, with an excess of compassion, refuse to allow their children to undergo necessary medical treatment because it is painful. Then also there are those cases where projects are based on hard technical considerations without regard for the

human cost that would be involved. In the planning and implementation of development programmes, the correct balance between compassion and wisdom has to be sought constantly. (But as one who can make no particular claim to wisdom, I cannot resist saying somewhat timorously, in parenthesis, “rather an excess of compassion than a dearth”).

Where there is loving kindness and compassion, sympathetic joy naturally follows. The fruit of successful development projects should be the greater happiness of the beneficiaries and the reward for those who planned and implemented the projects should be *mudita* that rejoices in the good fortune of others, free from envy or ill will.

Fundamental to the kind of development that enhances the quality of life is justice. Some might hold that justice is of such importance it should come before loving kindness and compassion, which have more to do with individual emotions than with the maintenance of peace and harmony in society. But if there is true loving kindness that regards all beings with equal benevolence, and there is compassion balanced with wisdom, justice will surely not be lacking. And it will be the best kind of justice, that which is tempered by gentle mercy.

It is because justice is so essential for peace and harmony that the defence of basic human rights has to be part of any programme for true development. As a political dissident on an authoritarian stage, I have been deeply involved in the struggle for human rights because I believe that respect for the inherent dignity of man is the key to genuine progress for any nation. And what is development about if it is not about progress? The acknowledgement by United Nations agencies and programmes of the centrality of people to development has broadened and deepened to include social, political, ethical and moral factors.

Concepts of development are more meaningfully divided into “people centred” and “government centred”, than into “western” and “eastern”. The United Nations Development Programme holds that development “must be woven around people, not people around development – and it should empower individuals and groups rather than disempower them. And development cooperation should focus directly on people, not just on nation-states.”¹²

This view would be supported by all those who believe in the basic human rights of peoples to participate fully in the social, political and economic processes within their country. It is a view based on the idea of the democratic foundation of development – development of the people, for the people, by

the people. It is the antithesis of the idea that development should be defined and directed by governments.

In spite of the new approach to development, the tendency to set it in terms of sprawling cities and rampant consumerism remains strong and has to be resisted by those for whom people matter more than blueprints and statistics. Sulak Sivaraksa suggests that a truly developed city may not perhaps be

distinguished by a multiple of skyscrapers, but by the values attendant on its growth: simplicity, comfort and respect for the community of life around it. People would enjoy a simpler, healthier and less costly diet, lower on the food chain and without toxic additives or wasteful packaging. Animals would no longer be annihilated at the rate of 500,000 per hour merely to be an option on every menu. A new work ethic could be to enjoy our work and to work in harmony with others, as opposed to getting ahead of others and having a miserable time doing it.¹³

Mr Sulak's views on development would find many supporters in the West. On the other hand there will be authoritarian governments in the East which would not accept that simplicity, comfort and respect for the environment should take precedence over such superficial signs of development as the sprouting of multi-storied buildings and the proliferation of automobiles regardless of the detrimental effects on the quality of life. There are peoples in the East as in the West who think the worth of a society is measured by its material wealth and by impressive figures of growth, ignoring the injustices and the pain that might lie behind them. Then there are those who believe that development must be measured in terms of human happiness, of peace within the community and of harmony with the environment. And so we come back to loving kindness and compassion.

All barriers of race and religion can be overcome when people work together on common endeavours based on love and compassion. Together we can help to develop a happier, better world where greed and ill will and selfishness are minimised. This is not impractical idealism; it is down-to-earth recognition of our greatest needs. Sometimes it takes courage to grapple with the difficulties that lie in the path of development. Unpopular decisions may have to be made, prejudices overcome. It may become necessary to defy despotic governments, to stand by the downtrodden and the underprivileged in the face of oppression and injustice. But "perfect love casteth out fear" and

everything becomes possible when charitable projects are carried out with true charity in the heart.

Paradise on earth is a concept which is outmoded and few people believe in it any more. But we can certainly seek to make our planet a better, happier home for all of us by constructing the heavenly abodes of love and compassion in our hearts. Beginning with this inner development we can go on to the development of the external world with courage and wisdom.

I would like to conclude with the simple, straightforward words of His Holiness the Dalai Lama: "Without love, human society is in a very difficult state; without love, in the future we will face tremendous problems. Love is the centre of human life."¹⁴

May we all be able to work together in loving kindness and harmony to bring true development to our needy brethren.

Footnotes

- 1 This article is based on the CAFOD (Catholic Fund for Overseas Development) Pope Paul VI Memorial Lecture delivered on the author's behalf by her husband, Dr Michael Aris, in London on 8 November 1997.
- 2 Sulak Sivaraksa, *Seeds of Peace: A Buddhist Vision for Renewing Society*, Berkeley, 1992, p.45
- 3 *Ibid.*, p.47
- 4 *The Vinaya Pitakam*, ed. Herman Oldenberg, 5 vols, Pali Text Society, 1879-83, repr. 1964, I. pp.301-3. For translations, see Bhikkhu Nanamoli, *The Life of the Buddha*, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, 1972, pp.178-9; *The Book of Discipline: Vinaya-Pitaka*, trans. I.B. Horner, 6 vols., Pali Text Society, 1938-66, repr. 1996, iv, pp.431-3
- 5 See the story of Patacara in the commentary on the Therigatha, summarised in G.P. Malalasekera, *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names*, 2 vols., repr. Pali Text Society, 1992, ii, pp. 112-14
- 6 The Fourteenth Dalai Lama, *Kindness, Clarity and Insight*, Ithaca, New York, 1984, pp.60-1
- 7 1 Corinthians 13:2-5, 8, 13
- 8 From the definition of *metta* in Sayadaw U Pandita, *In This Very Life*, Kandy, 1991, p.286
- 9 Arnold Kotler (ed.), *Engaged Buddhist Reader*, Berkeley, 1996, p.14
- 10 U Pandita, *In This Very Life*, p.284
- 11 The poem is by Shabkar Tsogdruk Randröl, translated in Matthien Ricard, *Journey to Enlightenment: The Life and World of Khyentse Rinpoche, Spiritual Teacher from Tibet*, New York, 1996, p.54
- 12 UNDP, *Human Development Report*, 1993, Oxford, p.1
- 13 Sulak, *Seeds of Peace*, p.45
- 14 The Fourteenth Dalai Lama, 1984, op. cit., p.64

