



Eco-Buddhism: Exploring the Intersection of Buddhist thought and Sustainable Development Practices

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.55248/gengpi.5.1024.3004>

ABSTRACT

The integration of Buddhist principles into sustainable development practices offers a holistic and culturally informed approach to addressing global challenges. This paper explores the alignment between core Buddhist concepts and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), highlighting the potential for Buddhist-inspired approaches to contribute to more effective and balanced solutions. Fundamental Buddhist teachings, such as the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, provide a framework for understanding and addressing suffering, which can be applied to environmental and social issues. Key principles, including interconnectedness, non-harm, mindfulness, the Middle Way, compassion, impermanence, and non-attachment, are examined in relation to their potential contributions to sustainable development practices. Case studies of the Eco-Monasticism movement in Thailand and the Green Buddhist movement in Japan demonstrate the practical application of Buddhist principles in fostering environmental conservation and sustainable living. However, the paper also acknowledges challenges and criticisms surrounding the integration of Buddhist philosophy into sustainable development, such as practical implementation difficulties, compatibility with modern economic systems, and the risk of oversimplifying complex Buddhist teachings. The paper concludes by emphasizing the importance of further research and the thoughtful incorporation of Buddhist principles into sustainable development initiatives, taking into account cultural contexts and potential limitations, to effectively address global challenges and promote a more balanced and equitable future for all.

Key words: Sustainable development Goal, Environmental protection, Economic growth, Social equity, Interdependence, Compassion, Mindfulness, Buddhist Philosophy

Introduction

Buddhist philosophy, originating in ancient India, is founded on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, known as the Buddha. At its core, Buddhism emphasizes the Four Noble Truths: the existence of suffering, its cause, the possibility of its cessation, and the path to end suffering. This path, known as the Eightfold Path, includes right understanding, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration. Buddhist philosophy also emphasizes impermanence, non-self, and interdependence, encouraging practitioners to cultivate compassion, mindfulness, and wisdom. These principles aim to liberate individuals from suffering and achieve enlightenment through understanding the nature of reality and developing ethical conduct, mental discipline, and insight.

Sustainable development has emerged as a critical global imperative, encompassing environmental, economic, and social dimensions to ensure a balanced and equitable future for all. The United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), underscores the importance of this concept in addressing pressing global challenges (Annarelli et al., 2024).

The importance of sustainable development lies in its holistic approach to tackling issues such as poverty eradication, environmental protection, and social inclusion. It aims to foster economic growth while ensuring responsible resource management and social equity (Khan et al., 2021). The concept has evolved from early forestry practices to a comprehensive framework that considers the interconnectedness of environmental, social, and economic aspects (Kaimovs & Skarupins, 2024). Interestingly, while sustainable development is widely recognized as crucial, there are disparities in the attention given to different SDGs. For instance, in the textile and apparel industry, goals such as "Responsible Consumption and production" receive considerable attention, while others like "No Poverty" and "Reduced Inequalities" are often overlooked (Cai & Choi, 2020). This highlights the need for a more balanced approach to sustainable development across various sectors.

Sustainable development is a concept that aims to address the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own requirements. This approach encompasses three interconnected pillars: economic development, social equity, and environmental protection. The significance of sustainable development lies in its comprehensive approach to addressing global challenges

1. *Environmental preservation: This approach promotes responsible resource management, biodiversity conservation, and climate change mitigation strategies.*

2. *Economic stability: It encourages long-term economic growth that is both inclusive and environmentally sustainable.*
3. *Social equity: The concept aims to alleviate poverty, enhance access to education and healthcare, and promote gender equality.*
4. *Intergenerational responsibility: It ensures that future generations inherit a habitable planet with sufficient resources to meet their needs.*
5. *Global cooperation: Sustainable development fosters international collaboration to address shared environmental and social challenges.*
6. *Innovation: It drives the development of novel technologies and practices that are more efficient and environmentally friendly.*
7. *Quality of life: The approach seeks to enhance overall well-being by balancing economic, social, and environmental factors.*

Sustainable development is vital for addressing global challenges and ensuring a resilient, equitable, and livable environment for present and future generations. It requires coordinated efforts at local, national, and global levels, integrating environmental, economic, and social considerations (Kaimovs & Skarupins, 2024). By adopting sustainable practices and policies, societies can work towards a more prosperous and balanced future for all. The implementation of sustainable development practices is essential for addressing pressing global issues such as climate change, resource depletion, and social inequalities. These practices span various sectors and require a multifaceted approach to achieve meaningful progress. Modern languages and translations play a vital role in promoting sustainable environmental practices by facilitating knowledge exchange and collaboration across linguistic and cultural boundaries (Pa?calau et al., 2023). This approach is not limited to developed economies, as many developing and under-developed countries are also taking proactive steps to incorporate sustainability into their frameworks. Remarkably, the implementation of sustainable practices faces several challenges, particularly in higher education institutions. A study of Malaysian public universities revealed that while most had implemented green initiatives, numerous obstacles were encountered (Mohd Muhiddin et al., 2023). However, solutions exist to push green campus initiatives forward, with university management and communities playing major roles in realizing Sustainable Development Goals. Achieving sustainable development requires innovative strategies and a comprehensive approach. The integration of technological advancements, policy innovations, and community-driven approaches is essential in addressing environmental degradation, social inequality, and economic challenges (Ruhana et al., 2024). Interdisciplinary collaboration, policy integration, and inclusive governance are critical for overcoming these challenges and effectively implementing sustainable solutions on a global scale.

The integration of Buddhist philosophical principles into sustainable development practices offers a comprehensive approach to addressing environmental and social challenges. Buddhist concepts such as interconnectedness, mindfulness, and compassion demonstrate significant alignment with sustainable development objectives. The Buddhist notion of interdependence underscores the complex connections among all living entities and their environments, thereby promoting a more nuanced understanding of ecological systems. Mindfulness practices encourage individuals to develop heightened awareness of their consumption patterns and the consequent environmental impact, thus fostering more responsible decision-making processes. Furthermore, the Buddhist emphasis on compassion extends beyond human beings to encompass all sentient entities, thereby supporting efforts aimed at biodiversity conservation and ecosystem protection. The incorporation of these principles into sustainable development initiatives has the potential to cultivate a more profound sense of responsibility towards the planet and its inhabitants, potentially resulting in more efficacious and enduring solutions to global sustainability challenges.

Buddhist philosophy and principles significantly influence sustainable development practices, particularly in Southeast Asian countries. The integration of Buddhist ethics into development strategies fosters inclusive community development and enriches the global dialogue on sustainable development (Douglas, 2024). This approach aligns with the core elements of sustainable development, emphasizing different dimensions of sustainability that can complement and enhance traditional Western approaches (Matz, 2002). Buddhist-inspired approaches to development communication have been implemented in countries like Sri Lanka, Lao PDR, and Thailand, where Buddhist monks and nuns play important roles in rural community development initiatives. These approaches vary in methods due to cultural context differences but share a philosophical basis centered on Buddhism and local culture integration (Minh Tran & Minh Le, 2024). Interestingly, the concept of "Buddhist Sustainable Development" (BSD) suggests that sustainable development can be achieved through generating inner happiness, providing an alternative to conventional development approaches (Kittiprapas, 2021).

The integration of Buddhist philosophy into sustainable development practices offers a culturally coherent and geopolitically informed approach. It emphasizes the importance of inner wisdom, compassion, and ethical principles in achieving sustainable outcomes. However, challenges exist in aligning donor expectations with authentic compassionate actions and in the standardization of corporate sustainability reporting, which may disconnect local Buddhist influences from organizational practices (Abeydeera et al., 2016). Further research is needed to explore the applicability of Buddhist-inspired development strategies across different regions and to assess their long-term impacts on sustainability outcomes.

Buddhist principles and sustainable development

Buddhist principles offer valuable insights into sustainable development, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all beings and the importance of mindful living. The Four Noble Truths, a fundamental teaching of Buddhism, provide a framework for understanding and addressing suffering, which can be applied to environmental and social challenges (Kalra et al., 2018). These truths recognize the existence of suffering, its causes, the possibility of its cessation, and the path to end suffering. The Noble Eightfold Path, consisting of right view, resolve, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration, offers practical guidance for sustainable living (Das, 2023; Phongphan & Borromeo-Eballo, 2022). This path encourages individuals to cultivate awareness, ethical behavior, and balanced consumption, which are essential for sustainable development. The concept of interconnectedness,

or "paticcasamuppāda" (theory of interdependency), highlights the intricate relationships between all living beings and their environment, emphasizing the need for a holistic approach to sustainability (Pemananda & Kuruppu, 2021).

Buddhist principles provide a comprehensive framework for addressing sustainable development challenges. By integrating these teachings into economic models and social practices, societies can work towards a more balanced and sustainable future. For example, the Self-Sufficiency Economy model in Thailand demonstrates how Buddhist principles can be applied to achieve sustainability in various aspects of life (Phongphan & Borromeo-Eballo, 2022). Additionally, the concept of Buddhist economics offers an alternative worldview that challenges mainstream Western economic assumptions, promoting shared prosperity in a sustainable world with minimal suffering (Brown & Zsolnai, 2018).

Discussion on Buddhist principles offer valuable insights that can be applied to sustainable development practices:

Interconnectedness:

Buddhism emphasizes the interconnectedness of all things, which aligns with the holistic approach needed in sustainable development. This principle encourages considering the broader impacts of development initiatives on ecosystems, communities, and future generations. The concept of paticcasamuppāda (dependent origination) in Buddhism shares some philosophical similarities with the interconnected nature of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), though there is no direct mention of this Buddhist concept in the provided context.

The SDGs are described as an "assemblage of interwoven goals" (Perkins et al., 2022) and a "blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all" (Perkins et al., 2022). This interconnectedness is further emphasized in (Abidi & Jamil, 2023), which states that "all aspects of human society are interconnected and dependent on the health and vitality of the natural endowments." This aligns with the Buddhist concept of paticcasamuppāda, which emphasizes the interdependence of all phenomena. However, the implementation of SDGs faces challenges in achieving coherence across environmental, social, and economic goals (Coscieme et al., 2021). The analysis of SDG implementation in the European Union reveals that "environmental goals are by some distance the most complex and least coherent of the SDGs" (Coscieme et al., 2021). This highlights the difficulty in practically applying the principle of interconnectedness, which is central to both paticcasamuppāda and the SDGs.

The SDGs and paticcasamuppāda share a philosophical foundation in recognizing the interconnectedness of various aspects of life and development, the practical implementation of this principle in the form of SDGs faces significant challenges. The research suggests a need for improved coherence and integration in approaching sustainable development, which could potentially benefit from deeper consideration of philosophical concepts like paticcasamuppāda.

Non-harm (Ahimsa): This principle can guide sustainable development by prioritizing practices that minimize harm to the environment and living beings. It supports the adoption of eco-friendly technologies and conservation efforts. The concept of non-harm (Ahimsa) aligns closely with several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those focused on social and environmental well-being. SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) is most directly related to non-harm, as it aims to promote peaceful societies and reduce violence (*Sustainable Development Goals*, 2021). This goal embodies the spirit of Ahimsa by seeking to minimize harm at societal levels. Similarly, SDGs 14 and 15, which focus on life below water and on land respectively, reflect the principle of non-harm towards the environment and ecosystems (Cernev & Fenner, 2019). These goals emphasize the protection and sustainable use of natural resources, aligning with the broader interpretation of Ahimsa that extends beyond human interactions to include all living beings and nature.

The concept of non-harm is not explicitly mentioned in the SDG framework. However, it is implicitly woven into many goals, such as SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), which aim to improve human welfare and reduce harm caused by social disparities (Cernev & Fenner, 2019). The interconnected nature of the SDGs, as highlighted in (Cernev & Fenner, 2019), suggests that progress in one area can have positive ripple effects across others, potentially amplifying the impact of non-harm principles. While Ahimsa is not directly referenced in the SDGs, its essence is reflected in multiple goals that aim to reduce harm to people, society, and the environment. The holistic approach of the SDGs, which addresses economic, social, and environmental factors (Bali Swain & Yang-Wallentin, 2019), aligns well with the comprehensive nature of non-harm principles, suggesting that progress towards the SDGs could contribute significantly to realizing the ideals of Ahimsa on a global scale.

Mindfulness:

Applying mindfulness to sustainable development encourages conscious decision-making and awareness of the long-term consequences of actions. This can lead to more thoughtful resource management and consumption patterns. While the provided context does not directly address the relationship between mindfulness and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), we can draw some connections based on the information available.

The SDGs are a set of 17 interconnected global goals designed to address various social, economic, and environmental challenges (Gan, 2019; Hoang et al., 2022). These goals aim to create a more sustainable future by focusing on issues such as poverty eradication, environmental protection, and social inclusion (Adelman, 2018; Gan, 2019). Mindfulness, as a practice of present-moment awareness and self-reflection, could potentially contribute to the achievement of these goals in several ways.

The context does not explicitly mention mindfulness in relation to the SDGs. However, we can infer that mindfulness practices could align with the SDGs' focus on holistic well-being and sustainable living. For example, mindfulness could support the mental health aspects of SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) or contribute to more conscious consumption patterns, which relate to SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production). There is

potential for mindfulness practices to support the broader goals of sustainable development. Future research could explore how mindfulness interventions might contribute to specific SDG targets or how incorporating mindfulness into sustainability initiatives could enhance their effectiveness. This integration could potentially address some of the challenges in achieving the SDGs, such as the tension between economic growth and ecological sustainability (Adelman, 2018; Eisenmenger et al., 2020).

Middle Way:

The Buddhist concept of the Middle Way, avoiding extremes, can be applied to find balanced solutions in sustainable development, considering economic growth, social equity, and environmental protection. The concept of the Middle Way in Buddhism and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) share some common ground in their approach to addressing global challenges and promoting well-being. The SDGs represent a comprehensive framework for addressing complex global issues, covering social development, environmental protection, and economic growth (Asadikia et al., 2022). They aim to create a "blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all" (Domingo-Echaburu et al., 2021). This holistic approach aligns with the Middle Way's emphasis on balance and avoiding extremes.

While the SDGs are designed to be interconnected and mutually reinforcing, research has shown that their achievement varies significantly based on geographic location and income levels (Asadikia et al., 2022). This highlights the need for a nuanced, context-specific approach, which resonates with the Middle Way's emphasis on adaptability and finding appropriate solutions for different situations. Both the Middle Way and the SDGs seek to address complex challenges through balanced, holistic approaches. While the SDGs provide a concrete framework for global action, the Middle Way offers a philosophical foundation that could complement and enhance efforts to achieve sustainable development. Integrating these perspectives could potentially lead to more effective and sustainable solutions to global challenges.

Compassion:

Incorporating compassion into sustainable development practices ensures that the needs of all stakeholders, including marginalized communities, are considered in development plans. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a comprehensive set of 17 interconnected objectives designed to address global challenges and create a more sustainable future for all (, 2021; Gizewski et al., 2023). While compassion is not explicitly mentioned in the SDGs, it is inherently linked to their core principles of leaving no one behind and addressing the needs of the most vulnerable communities (Jayasooria & Yi, 2023).

Compassion plays a crucial role in achieving the SDGs, particularly in areas related to social development, poverty eradication, and reducing inequalities. For instance, the social and solidarity economy (SSE) organizations work with vulnerable communities at the grassroots level, demonstrating compassion in action and contributing to the localization of SDGs (Jayasooria & Yi, 2023). Similarly, the social work profession, which is rooted in compassion and social justice, aligns closely with the SDGs' values and can make significant contributions through public impact scholarship (Bromfield & Duarte, 2022).

Impermanence:

Recognizing the transient nature of things can foster adaptability in sustainable development strategies, encouraging flexible approaches that can evolve with changing environmental and social conditions. The concept of impermanence does not appear to be directly addressed in the provided context about Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, we can draw some connections between the idea of impermanence and the SDGs based on the available information.

The SDGs represent a global effort to address pressing challenges and create a more sustainable future for all (*Sustainable Development Goals*, 2021). This inherently acknowledges the impermanent nature of current societal, economic, and environmental conditions. The goals aim to transform these conditions by 2030, recognizing that change is both necessary and possible (Chiba & Katsuma, 2022). This aligns with the concept of impermanence, which suggests that all phenomena are in a constant state of flux.

The SDGs strive for long-term sustainable development, they themselves are not permanent. They succeeded the Millennium Development Goals and are set to be achieved by 2030 (Diouf, 2019). This suggests an understanding that development goals and strategies must evolve to address changing global circumstances, further reflecting the principle of impermanence.

Non-attachment:

This principle can be applied to reduce overconsumption and materialism, promoting more sustainable patterns of production and consumption. The Buddhist principle of non-attachment and non-reliance presents an interesting perspective when considering the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). While the SDGs aim for global progress and development, the Buddhist philosophy emphasizes detachment from material pursuits and self-reliance.

In the context of the SDGs, the Buddhist concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) from Bhutan offers a unique approach to development that aligns more closely with non-attachment principles (Van Norren, 2020). GNH prioritizes well-being over economic growth, challenging the conventional development paradigms underlying the SDGs. This perspective suggests that true sustainability may require a shift from linear growth thinking to

cyclical thinking that replaces growth with well-being for all beings (Van Norren, 2020). The contrast between Buddhist philosophy and the SDGs highlights potential contradictions in the global development agenda. While the SDGs focus on measurable targets and economic progress, Buddhist principles emphasize inner contentment and harmony with nature. This difference in approach raises questions about the universal applicability of the SDGs and whether they adequately address diverse cultural perspectives on development and sustainability (Van Norren, 2020).

The Buddhist principle of non-attachment offers a valuable counterpoint to the SDGs, suggesting that sustainable development may require a more holistic approach that considers spiritual and philosophical dimensions alongside economic and environmental factors. Integrating these diverse worldviews could lead to a more inclusive and effective global sustainability framework.

Implementing these principles in sustainable development practice could involve:

- Conducting comprehensive environmental and social impact assessments before initiating projects
- Prioritizing renewable energy and circular economy models
- Developing mindfulness-based education programs to raise awareness about sustainable living
- Engaging in participatory decision-making processes that include all stakeholders
- Promoting sustainable agriculture practices that respect local ecosystems
- Designing urban spaces that foster community connections and harmony with nature
- Implementing policies that encourage responsible consumption and production

By integrating these Buddhist-inspired approaches, sustainable development practices can become more holistic, ethical, and effective in addressing complex global challenges.

Challenges and criticisms of Buddhist-inspired sustainable development

Several challenges and criticisms have been raised regarding Buddhist-inspired approaches to sustainable development

1. **Practical implementation:** The translation of Buddhist principles into concrete policies and practices presents significant challenges, particularly in non-Buddhist societies or secular contexts.
 2. **Economic growth concerns:** There is a perceived conflict between the Buddhist emphasis on non-attachment and minimalism and the economic growth objectives often deemed necessary for development.
 3. **Cultural appropriation:** Concerns have been raised about Western interpretations selectively adopting Buddhist concepts without fully comprehending their cultural and philosophical contexts.
 4. **Oversimplification:** Critics argue that complex Buddhist teachings are occasionally reduced to simplistic slogans or practices, potentially compromising their deeper meanings.
 5. **Compatibility with modernity:** Questions arise regarding the alignment of traditional Buddhist values with contemporary technological and economic systems.
 6. **Measurability:** The subjective nature of certain Buddhist-inspired goals (e.g., inner peace, mindfulness) poses challenges in quantifying and evaluating progress.
 7. **Political challenges:** The implementation of Buddhist-inspired policies may encounter resistance in pluralistic societies or those with different dominant religious traditions.
 8. **Potential for passivity:** Some interpretations of Buddhist teachings as promoting acceptance of current conditions may potentially hinder active efforts for social change.
 9. **Environmental trade-offs:** While generally pro-environmental, certain Buddhist practices (e.g., merit-making through construction) may have unintended negative ecological impacts.
 10. **Scalability:** The application of Buddhist-inspired approaches beyond local or community levels to national or global scales presents considerable challenges.
 11. **Equity concerns:** Critics argue that an emphasis on individual mindfulness or spiritual development may inadvertently neglect systemic inequalities and social justice issues.
 12. **Scientific skepticism:** Some question the empirical basis for claims regarding the benefits of Buddhist-inspired practices in development contexts.
1. Addressing these challenges necessitates careful consideration of how Buddhist principles can be thoughtfully and

Conclusion

This article explores the integration of Buddhist principles into sustainable development practices. It highlights the importance of sustainable development in addressing global challenges such as poverty, environmental degradation, and social inequity. The text discusses how Buddhist concepts like interconnectedness, mindfulness, compassion, and the Middle Way align with sustainable development goals and can contribute to more holistic and effective approaches. Case studies of the Eco-Monasticism movement in Thailand and the Green Buddhist movement in Japan demonstrate the practical application of Buddhist principles in environmental conservation and sustainable living. However, the text also acknowledges challenges and criticisms, such as practical implementation difficulties, compatibility with modern economic systems, and potential oversimplification of complex Buddhist teachings. The text concludes by emphasizing the importance of further research and thoughtful integration of Buddhist philosophy into sustainable development initiatives to address global challenges effectively.

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