

8<sup>th</sup> Conference on  
United Nations Day of Vesak Celebrations  
**WORLD PEACE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**  
at Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University campus and UN Headquarter,  
Bangkok, Thailand  
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I am deeply grateful to the Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya, University as well as the joint international organizing committee of the United Nations Day of Vesak Celebrations for the honour they have done me, in inviting me to this conference that is being held to commemorate a day that is of great significance in the hallowed heritage of humanity. As is well known, it is a day that is associated with the birth, the enlightenment and the Mahaparibhana or the Passing of the Lord Buddha

The Sakyamuni's spiritual journey commenced from compassion, the Great Compassion that arose in him for the suffering that sentient beings were undergoing, and his great desire to find the knowledge or the path that could enable sentient beings to free themselves from suffering and the causes of suffering. It was not to speculate on God or the conundrums of creation that Gautama renounced the pursuit of pleasure and power and repaired to the penance groves. It was not the allurements of a life in Heaven that motivated him. What motivated his search for light, the knowledge, the way of life that would lead us out of suffering was his determination to discover what sentient beings, particularly human beings could do – should do – here and now, in this world, in this life to end suffering forever, by ending the contemporary states of suffering as well as the causes of suffering that pursued human beings or sentient beings from one life to another. As the followers of the Buddha we are therefore concerned with suffering, all manifestations of suffering everywhere, and in the life of all sentient beings, and the motive of our endeavours has to be to find and cling to what can lead to the end of suffering.

Two of the major causes of suffering in our world today arise from poverty, deprivation, absence of access to the basic material requirements of life, and from the attitudes of mind that lead us to resort to the use of force, violence and war in our anxiety to pursue our material interests and aspirations, and sometimes even to pursue objectives that are justified in the name of religion or ideologies or other aggregates that can invoke fierce loyalties in us. The whole of humanity today is therefore deeply concerned with what we do or do not do to end the poverty that causes deep suffering to millions of our fellow human beings; and to end the current propensity to resort to the use of force to settle disputes or assert rights or secure recognition for identities or protect the projected interests of identities. In other words, threats to peace and the goals and strategies of development have

become the urgent and universal concerns of humanity. Any religion or religious community or social aggregate that is concerned with human suffering and the elimination of the causes of suffering has therefore to acknowledge peace and development as matters of urgent concern, and has to identify the contribution that it can make to the realization of these goals.

It is therefore extremely appropriate that this conference is devoting itself to a discussion of Peace and Sustainable Development. To identify and accelerate the contribution that we, as Buddhists, can make to the achievement of sustainable development and peace, we have first to clarify our minds on the concept of development or our perception of development. The pattern of development that we see today in most countries of the world is the pattern that emerged in the West as a result of the Industrial Revolution. It is true that since the Industrial Revolution the world has witnessed the rise and vicissitudes of the Capitalist system, the Communist or socialist system, and variants of systems that based themselves on the philosophy of a welfare state, a state that intervened without asserting the monopoly of powers and responsibility, and yet used power to go towards a regime of equity and protection of the weak. Even so all these systems followed the pattern of industrialization that emerged with the capitalist system. If one is to judge from the results that these have yielded, the pattern of development that they accepted has not led to the abolition of poverty or misery. It has not led to the elimination or control of disparities, to narrowing the appalling gulf between the affluent few and the millions who live under the poverty line, without the means necessary to meet the basic requirements of life, like food, clothing, shelter, education in skills and medical attention. Millions, in different parts of the world continue to live in poverty, disease, deprivation and illiteracy. Their life is steeped in misery and uncertainty, and the present pattern of development has not helped these millions to overcome their misery and suffering. The pattern has not only led to the persistence of poverty and deprivation, but also led to increase in disparities and inequality that incite jealousy, indignation and readiness to resort to violence to alter situations. Those who are the victims of the system continue to face suffering, and those who are the beneficiaries of the system also face the risks that arise from the indignation of those who feel deprived and exploited.

Buddhism cannot be happy with any system that ignores or increases the suffering of some – many in this case – and alleviates the suffering of a few others. It cannot discriminate between one sentient being and another, one human being and another, and adopt systems and strategies that ignore some, and countenance strategies that result in affluence for some at the cost of increasing misery for others. It believes in the need to end the suffering of all human beings – all sentient beings. A Buddhist perspective on the goals of development as well as the strategies of development must therefore flow from, and be consistent with, the fundamental perceptions of Buddhism. These include:

- i. Compassion – loving compassion, for all sentient beings.

- ii. The interdependence of all phenomena and all animate beings and all aspects of the life of all sentient beings.
- iii. The inexorability of the law of cause and effect.
- iv. Utility as a means that can lead to the alleviation and elimination of suffering, the identification and elimination of the causes of suffering.
- v. Avoidance of all attitudes and actions that can create the causes of suffering in the present or in the near or distant future.

Perhaps we should begin with our motivation. What is the thought that motivates us to seek development? Is it the desire to maximize the benefits and profits of a few, or is it the desire to end misery and suffering for all? For a Buddhist, compassion or loving compassion has to be the primary motivation for development. Every human being has an equal right to live and seek freedom from suffering, and therefore, the goals and strategies of development must have as their object this desire to assure the fruits of development to all.

Secondly, development is based on the utilization of natural resources and human skills and human endeavour. Since many of these natural resources are limited, and cannot be replenished by human effort when depleted or exhausted, it will be illogical to believe that there can be unlimited growth in production. If there are limits to production, there have to be limits to consumption, as well as equity in access to what are needed to sustain life and make life meaningful. If it is accepted that there are limits to what is available for consumption, it has to be accepted that multiplication of wants and an attitude that looks upon multiplication of possessions as the hallmark of culture and civilization are untenable, and can be maintained only at the cost of denying essentials to others. A system which denies essentials to many can be maintained only with violent means and suppression, which in turn may result in danger to the system and those who support the system. Dependence on natural resources and dependence on partners in production are consequences of the paradigms of interdependence that characterize the world. Development cannot ignore these paradigms. It has therefore to take place within regimes of ecological responsibility and social responsibility. Ecological responsibility includes the responsibility to preserve the eco system on which all life depends, to abstain from polluting and poisoning the air, water and earth which sustain life, to minimize depletion and to maximize the efforts to replenish. Only such a pattern of development can be sustainable.

Thirdly, as we have stated earlier, development should not lead to, or depend on an attitude that looks upon the number and variety of one's possessions as the index of growth or civilization or social status. Such an attitude will only lead to acquisitiveness, covetousness, and the restiveness of mind that comes from endless desires. Desires do not disappear with satiation. They only make the mind restless, and make one suffer. Desire becomes the cause of suffering. Development that was conceived of as a means to end suffering should not result in the aggravation

of suffering and in planting the seeds of incurable suffering. The desire for development should not land one in the coils of consumerism, which is a manifestation of insatiable desire and covetousness, of Trishna which cannot lead to freedom from suffering, which in fact can only lead to suffering.

Whatever I have said up to now is enough to underline the relation between the need for development, the perceptions of development that we adopt the strategies of development that we pursue or are forced to pursue, and the conditions on which a genuine and enduring regime of peace can be built in the world. Uncertainty and hunger cannot produce peace. Avarice and acquisitiveness cannot produce peace, either in one's mind or in the society in which one lives. Obsession with material possessions cannot produce peace. Yet these are not the only factors that affect peace. There are other contributory causes and factors that are as important, and from one point of view, even more powerful and crucial. These relate to the desire or ambition to dominate, to have power over the lives and minds of other human beings, attitudes of intolerance to differences in customs or culture or views and perceptions of interest. This raises the crucial question of one's perception of the means that one should employ to deal with differences. The nature of the human mind is such that all human beings do not think alike, or feel alike or react alike. This being so, human beings have to learn to live with differences and find ways of resolving differences without annihilating one who is different or one who holds a different view. It is essential for humanity therefore to find a way of resolving differences without violence, which is used to intimidate or overpower the body or the mind, and to compel one human being or group or nation to submit to the will or views of the other, even when the victim does not accept that the views that are forced on him are logical or just. Physical force or its magnification that is manifested in sophisticated arms and weapons cannot establish truth or justice. Yet, we have got caught in the vicious cycle of violence and vengeance, because we cling to the belief that violence can lead to the solution of disputes or incipient conflicts. It is a pity, an irony, which we are willing to ignore the testimony of many centuries and the lessons that many wars and arms races hold for us, and still cling to the belief that war or violence and its variants can solve problems.

The variety and colossal destructive power of the weapons that science and technology have placed at our disposal have brought humanity to the brink of self-destruction. Nuclear and biological weapons and other weapons of mass destruction have made all human kind, and the eco system on which life depends, universally vulnerable. Terrorism has also raised the threat of indiscriminate destruction, and increased universal vulnerability. Security has become a mirage or dream. Yet we don't seem to realize that all this is our own creation; all this is the outcome of our faith in violence, our readiness to hurt, destroy or annihilate others in the pursuit of our self interest, forgetting the fact that in an interdependent world we cannot harm others without harming ourselves, whether our attacks are with

economic weapons or the destructive weapons of warfare or the tactics of terrorism.

The seeds of these two beliefs – one in the use of violence, and the other in the sacrosanctness of unbridled self interest – can be found in our minds and in many of our institutions, or systems under which we live. We cannot hope to build a regime of peace unless we weed out these seeds from our minds and institutions, and substitute them with beliefs that are consistent with compassion and interdependence. One cannot be compassionate and yet cause suffering; yet engage in violence and destruction. One cannot ignore the consequences of interdependence, and believe that one can prosper by hurting others on whom one depends for one's prosperity and existence. One cannot destroy the eco system in the name of development, and yet hope that life, including human life will survive. One cannot swear by equal human rights and intensify disparity and deprivation.

Thus, it can be seen that the antidotes to the problems and paradoxes that we face in the field of development and peace lie in compassion and awareness of interdependence. It is precisely these values or imperatives that Buddha Dharma places before us, and His Holiness the Dalai Lama has been exhorting us to follow. The spread of the values and ethics of Buddha Dharma will undoubtedly be an effective contribution to the cause of world peace and sustainable development.