



BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: INTEGRATING SOCIETY, ECONOMY, AND ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

Background and Objective: Prosperity achieved by human civilization loses its real meaning if the socio-economic well-being of mankind and its stewardship of natural systems are ignored. Any damage to these systems makes them unsustainable and ultimately threatens human civilization. The discussion of this study focuses on two contrasting philosophical approaches to sustainable development: An ongoing growth-oriented model that relies on profit, technology, and policy solutions, and an ethically grounded, justice-oriented view historically rooted in South Asian communities. The core debate centers on whether profit should define social and ecological outcomes, or whether social values should set the limits of profit. Whether sustainability is best understood as an individual market choice or as a collective responsibility, and the environmental crisis faced by humanity reflects a deficit of technology, or a crisis of ethical values that requires a fundamental shift. The main objective of the study was to critically examine the perspectives of sustainability with reference to Buddhist and spiritual practices in South Asia as a collective resource that informed holistic and value-driven responses to pressing global challenges, supported by empirical examples of development practices.

Methodology: A qualitative design with documentary research has been followed. With a systematic review of the literature, including classical Buddhist texts, the canon in Pali, and experiences from engaged Buddhism, the primary sources for the analysis were taken from these sources. Ideas from Key informants comprising 10 specialists regarding Buddhist Philosophy and their application have been conducted and taken as a guide for the analysis. Evidence from community-based practices has been incorporated to explain the understanding of Buddhism not only as a philosophy, but as an ethical and lively resource for supporting sustainable development. Applying a thematic approach to content analysis and comparative textual interpretation, the study proposes the concept of the Wisdom spiral, integrating the inner transformation with outer sustainability.

Main Results: Unlike the contemporary worldview, the indigenous and Buddhist worldviews and practices recognize the interdependence of all life and teach that true prosperity does not come from unlimited growth but from ethical living. The system guided by Buddhist philosophy offers an alternative in which harmony between human society, the ecosystem, and all beings can be achieved with deep respect. Proving philosophical guidelines of interdependence, the Middle Way,



and shared responsibility, Buddhist philosophy suggests a moral and practical framework for environmental, social, and economic balance with human-nature relations. The evidence from indigenous values and traditions in South Asian communities also reflects the lived experience of alternatives.

Involvement to Buddhadhamma: Drawing from the Buddhist philosophy and practices of Engaged Buddhism, this paper examines how Buddhist ideas have been reshaped in modern times as both spiritual imperatives and practical tools for shaping and implementing policy. A dialectical approach has been followed to find differences between the original Buddhist teaching and initiatives taken by engaged Buddhism for sustainable development. This allows for a nuanced understanding of how spiritual philosophy can help to shape the ethical boundaries of recent orientation. An interpretative textual analysis rooted in a historical cultural context has been explored to examine how classical Buddhist traditions are interpreted in practices.

Conclusions: Drawing on the concept of the wisdom spiral, integrated with the sustainability bottom line, the study concludes that sustainability requires more than technological advancement, and development becomes meaningful only when it respects economic viability, considers social equity, and respects ecological limits. The findings emphasize that human activity should be guided by moderation, compassion, and interdependence. Sustainability is more than a technological advancement. It is not value-neutral but requires fundamental ethical transformation that Buddhist and spiritual practices can offer holistically.

Keywords: Sustainable Development, Wisdom Spiral, Buddhist Philosophy, Inner Transformation, Engaged Buddhism

Introduction

The world today is facing a range of complex and interconnected challenges, including environmental degradation, climate change, geopolitical tensions, and the erosion of social trust, which are the main concerns. Accordingly, the philosophical debate today is centered on how these fundamental questions can be answered, regarding the interrelations of Profit, People, and Planet. That means, whether profit determines social and ecological outcomes, or should socio- ecological values define acceptable profit? Is sustainability an individual market choice or a collective moral responsibility? Is sustainability a neutral global framework or a historically rooted justice issue? Moreover, is the environmental crisis requiring better tools or better values? The orthodox answer is often based on market rationality. For them, profit is treated as compatible with, and even a driver of, social and ecological outcomes. Sustainability is viewed as an individual or corporate choice guided by incentives. The global frameworks are presented as neutral and universal, and the environmental crisis is primarily a problem that can be solved by advancing technologies and policy instruments. However, the South tends to frame sustainability as ethically and historically grounded. The social and ecological values define the moral limits of profit. Sustainability is taken as a collective responsibility rooted in community and intergenerational obligations. For them, global agendas on sustainable development are understood to be shaped by colonial histories and unequal development, and the global crisis is a technical failure rather than a crisis of values and power.



Studies in environmental justice literature highlight the need to consider distributional and procedural fairness in adaptation and climate action, not just technical mitigation tools (Walker et al., 2024). The established doctrine's answer frequently highlights the technical and policy-driven solutions. However, with growing recognition of the limitations of purely mechanical models, spiritual and moral worldviews are given as renewed alternatives to complementary frameworks. These alternatives support enriching the global governance and sustainable development, combining with the interconnected nature of all existence, and recommend a transformative perspective grounded in the philosophy of dependent origination, non-harm, and compassion. The historically and culturally fortified moral discipline and inner transformation recommend direction, not just for personal benefit or optimization of self-interest, but also as a guide for solving global problems of economic equality, ecological justice, and social harmony (Dhiman & Marques, 2016).

Sustainable development is not just about technical solutions for achieving growth targets. It is about sustained growth without harming the natural system and fair distribution. It is about growing awareness of the responsibility toward communities and future generations. Material growth in isolation cannot solve the problem. Spiritual philosophies grounded in values of non-violence (Ahimsa), mindful thinking with inner awareness, can support the whole mission. As the Brundtland Report (1987) defines sustainable development as that which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations, the doctrine of dependent origination. Buddhist philosophical orientation closely mirrors this focus with the concept of interdependence and the end of suffering across time and space. The Middle Way (Majjhima Patipada), the core of Buddhist teaching, focuses on moderated balances on consumption and collection that support sustainable living, harmonize with economic justice, ecological preservation, and safeguard against the unjustifiable exploitation of nature that aligns with key environmental goals (Gross, 2010). Mindfulness means cultivating acute awareness of how responsible behavior can impact the broader world (Kaza, 2009). The sustainable development discourse should translate into an organized approach that recognizes the complex interplay between ecological, social, and economic factors (Rockström et al., 2009); (Regmi, 2024). These perspectives of Buddhist philosophy clearly offer a spiritual motivation for a holistic approach to development, which aligns well with responsible consumption and production. Buddhist philosophy that focuses on protecting human beings from harm and promoting the well-being of all life forms in the world helps increase sustainability's emphasis on human dignity and the well-being of people and the planet (Sivaraksa, 2011). Recent-day Buddhists have progressively engaged with ecological issues. The Buddhadasa Bhikkhu emphasized Dhammic Socialism as a framework based on interdependence and compassion that encourages moral economy, ecological balance, and ethical governance (King, 1996); (Yoodee et al., 2022). This movement has also contributed significantly to deliberations on eco-dharma and spiritual ecology, resonating with the core principles of sustainable development and offering a moral and existential foundation. Moving its focus from mere policy and technology to the transformation of human consciousness and values, it is an approach that is increasingly recognized as vital in addressing the environmental crisis (Loy, 2010).



The global development discourse has made progress in addressing the economic, social, and environmental sectors. Research and experts' opinions suggest that the prevailing models are largely grounded in technocratic and policy-oriented approaches and overlook local spiritual dimensions of sustainability (Sachs, 2015). The change in ecological systems is being destabilized, and trust in global foundations is deteriorating day by day. In these contexts, technical solutions with their reliance on infinite growth within a finite system (Daly, 1996) are not sufficient to meet the complex challenges (Kehler & Birchall, 2021). The spiritual and cultural practices rooted in indigenous and Buddhist traditions can supplement the framework. They can help by enriching sustainable development with values of interdependence, compassion, non-harming, and mindfulness, which are underutilized (Gross, 2010); (Kaza, 2009). The tradition and cultures practiced throughout history by indigenous people and Buddhist teachings promote not only personal moral cultivation but also the collective responsibility for the well-being of all emotional beings and ecosystems. Buddhist thinkers and communities are increasingly applying these values to global issues such as environmental justice, peacebuilding, and ethical governance (King, 1996). Their relevance in bridging domestic development priorities with international cooperation, the incorporation of Buddhist international solidarity remains limited. Prevailing research and scholarship have sought to explore the philosophical foundations of the normative potential for guiding Buddhist teachings. However, sufficient attention has not been given to the applied aspects of the specific application in real-life practices. Which principles have been translated into practices across diverse contexts, and how far are they succeeding? Moreover, how have actions and policies guided by Buddhist ethics served as a foundation for promoting sustainable development? This gap is particularly evident when evaluating the intersection between Buddhist thought and the Sustainable Development approach overall and specific SDGs. How should we link the intersection of the idea of responsible consumption and production, climate action, peace, justice, and strong institutions? After outlining the conceptual foundation, the discussion of the study turns to selected empirical cases to address a critical research gap by examining how modern interpretations of Buddhist spiritual philosophy offer a transformative way to solve the problems that humanity is facing.

Objective

The main objective of the study was to critically examine contemporary perspectives of sustainability with reference to Buddhist philosophy and spiritual practices in South Asia, as a collective resource that informed holistic and value-driven responses to pressing global challenges, supported by empirical examples of development practices.

Methodology

Philosophically, the study is grounded on the truth that human and environmental well-being are inseparable parts of the cosmic web, and sustainable development rests on interdependence, non-self, moderation, and ethical action. Epistemologically, the experiential insight, right action, sustainable living, and inner clarity also help to produce knowledge that reduces suffering and fosters harmony for the present and future. This study has adopted the qualitative research design.



Based on a systematic review of the literature, an interpretative approach has been followed to analyze the relation of philosophical views with contextualized experiences. Relevant resources from Traditional Buddhism, including principles and doctrines of the Lord Buddha and Dhamma in the Pali Canon, cultivating the knowledge and wisdom of the Lord Buddha has been taken as the guide for philosophical/theoretical analysis. Resources from engaged Buddhism with recent knowledge and evidence in South Asia, especially related to sustainable development in three aspects: Economy, society, and environment, have been analyzed. Ideas from dependent origination (Paticcasamuppada), compassion (Karuna), and the doctrine of moderation (Majjhima Patipada) have been taken as a Philosophical guide for the analysis. Evidence from community-based practices, ethics, and socio-cultural traditions has been incorporated to explain the understanding of Buddhism not only as a philosophy, but as an ethical and lively resource for supporting sustainable development. Key Informants Interview (KIs) comprising 10 specialists from Buddhist thinkers has been conducted to validate and correct mismatches in concepts and ideas derived from established texts and practices.

Adopting a dialectical approach, spiritual and ethical ideas are viewed not only as fixed doctrines but as the living traditions and practices that communities have adapted for historical and social changes. Drawing the idea from the Buddhist philosophy and applying socio-political and economic theories, this paper examines how Buddhist ideas are reshaped in modern times as both spiritual imperatives and tools for shaping and implementing policies. Instead of presenting Buddhism as a rigid religious doctrine, a dialectical approach that emphasizes discourse, exploring agreement and differences between Buddhist teaching and initiatives taken on sustainability has been analyzed. This allows for a nuanced understanding of how spiritual philosophy can help to shape the ethical boundaries of modern ideas of sustainable development. An interpretative textual analysis constructed through human understanding and the historical cultural context has been explored to examine how classical Buddhist traditions are interpreted through the Wisdom spiral and how it aligns with the three pillars of Sustainable Development.

Primary sources for the study are established texts such as the Dhammapada, Majjhima Nikaya, and Samyutta Nikaya, supported by modern explanations of Buddhist thinkers. Ideas from interdependence, Karuna, non-violence, and the doctrine of moderation have been taken as a guide for the remedy of challenges faced by sustainability at global and local levels. Evidence from community-based practices, ethics, and socio-cultural traditions has been embodied that allows for explaining Buddhism to be understood not merely as philosophy, but as an ethical and lively resource for supporting sustainable development practices. Applying a thematic approach to content analysis and comparative textual interpretation, the study proposes a concept of the Wisdom spiral manifested in people's daily lives and traditions. The spiral of transformation as a continuous process has been used to describe constant, cyclical growth as a nonlinear path, revisiting the past from new perspectives, as Massey (2007) notes that sustainable development is not a static state, but a process of change.



Results and Discussion

The Concept of Wisdom spiral has been developed from the key teachings in Buddhist philosophy of inner transformation and their outer applications, including Socio-economic, environmental ethics, and sustainability education. The diagram in Figure 2 shows the progression from wisdom through the cycle that ultimately leads to deeper wisdom. Beginning with ethical awareness of socio-economic and ecological boundaries within which human activities must operate. It illustrates a cyclical framework in which initial insights gained through learning guide to right action. Right action further leads to sustainable living practices, inner peace and clarity, and deeper wisdom. Inner peace and clarity reflect the transformation of values that reinforce ethical commitment and a self-reinforcing cycle that challenges profit-centered sustainability. Sustainability is not a value-neutral technical solution, but rather morally grounded. The justice-centered, collective inner transformation process that pursues outer change is the core of sustainable development. The Anguttara Nikaya (Bodhi, 2012) describes an interconnected cyclical process in which wisdom begins with right view (Samma Dittihi) and guides ethical conduct (Sila), including right livelihood (Samma Ajiva). Ethical living helps to develop mental calm and clarity (Samadhi), which then leads to deeper wisdom (Panna). These processes are fundamental, as articulated in the Pali canon, and are mutually reinforcing. For analytical purposes, these canonical processes, matching with real-life practices, have been further simplified as: Initial insight → Right Action → Sustainable living → Inner Peace & Clarity → Deeper Wisdom, as shown in Figure 1.

Successive Development of Wisdom

Initial Insights

Initial Insights through learning:
Reflection of interconnectedness of men and environment

Right Action

Holistic Sustainability- socially just, environmentally sound, and economically viable

Sustainable Practices

Meeting present, safeguarding future,
Living in harmony, Honoring all life, Mental well-being.

Inner Peace & Clarity

Peaceful mind & clear Perception:
Reducing conflict, fostering equity, and promoting cultural respect

Deeper Wisdom

Insight rooted in lived experience/beginning of a new cycle;
Progressive strength



Figure 1 Concept of Wisdom Spiral integrating with real-world practices

Buddhist teachings supporting a transformative step-by-step process can be found in the collection of Long Discourses (Digha Nikaya) and The Numerical Discourses (Anguttara Nikaya) of



the Buddha, translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi (2012). They explain Wisdom in the Buddhist tradition and universal principles applicable to both monastics and householders, focusing on the cultivation of a disciplined mind, ethical conduct, and compassionate action to alleviate suffering. Beginning with initial insights, understanding life clearly, followed by ethical action, encourages people to act sustainably and responsibly in a balanced way that leads to inner peace and mental clarity for sustainable living. When the mind is peaceful, it helps to reduce conflict and respect for others. Through inner peace, one can gain a clear understanding, and a clear understanding fosters mental clarity with lived experience to higher-level wisdom. The connection between wisdom and sustainable action is deeply rooted in Buddhist ethics within the Eightfold Path. Because Right View with right understanding, naturally shapes ethical behavior that leads to Right Action and Right Livelihood. In this way, the inner transformation processes help to reduce misconduct and mindful action in day-to-day lives. For example, a balanced way of consumption and accumulation promotes ethics-based economic practices and prioritizes sustainability and social well-being over material gain (Schumacher, 1973); (Venerable Dhammapitaka (P. A. Payutto), 1994). Communities' adaptation of simplicity and mindful consumption helps to reduce suffering and fosters inner peace and clarity in implementing sustainable practices (Kaza, 2009); (Loy, 2010). In this way, inner transformation begins from the individual and spreads to the community and society.

Buddhist Philosophy and the Three Pillars of Sustainable Development

While growth-centered economic models are fundamentally flawed due to their reliance on infinite growth within a finite system, attempts to replace them with holistic, systems-based approaches often struggle with complexity and operationalization (Daly, 1996). After 2,500 years of Buddhist teachings, the global community has come to recognize that economic, social, and ecological phenomena are interconnected and proposes a model of sustainable development that centers on three pillars: Profit, people, and planet. This model recognized that all phenomena are related and interconnected, in the same line of Buddhist teaching of origin and interdependence. However, the Buddhist approach to sustainable development challenges the mainstream by prioritizing holistic well-being over material growth. It emphasizes inner spiritual growth beyond basic material needs (Kittiprapas, 2019), focuses on refinement rather than an end in itself, and realizes that sustainability is a process that naturally emerges as a byproduct of ongoing ethical practices toward nature (Phrakhrusamu Woravit Phasuko (Dutsadeephuttipun) & Kaewwilai, 2025). These are the replicas of indigenous and engaged Buddhist practices in different communities, integrating spiritual, cultural, and material needs that highlight their potential to promote ethically grounded and balanced development (Zangmo, 2016). These interlinkages among the three pillars of sustainable development are shaped by the dimension of culture. Culture reflects the ways of being, relating, behaving, believing, and acting which differ according to context, history, and tradition, and within which human beings breathe out their lives (UNESCO, 2004). The experiences and cultural practices of indigenous and Buddhist communities and movements explicitly or implicitly contribute to all three pillars of sustainable development through their doctrinal values, actions, and outreach.



Social Sustainability: Among the three pillars of sustainable development proposed by the framework, social sustainability focuses on the rights, promoting empowerment and fairness, expanding opportunities, and strengthening social connections that continue across generations. It depends on strong health systems, peace, respect for human rights, decent work, gender equality, quality education, and the rule of law (UN, 1996). These components are similar to the Buddhist teachings and practices, as the Buddhist offering of practical guidelines emphasizes active involvement in addressing social justice, safeguarding human dignity, and advocating for the rights of indigenous and marginalized communities. Gender equality and equitable access to education, healthcare, and community welfare are fundamental to building inclusive societies (Queen & King, 1996). In real-world practices, monasteries and other related governmental and non-governmental organizations across Asia are acting as vital agents in promoting social change, especially in rural or underserved areas, by providing education and healthcare facilities (Kraft, 1992). Intellectuals from Buddhist communities are serving not only to empower individual and marginalized communities but also to help foster broader social sustainability (Queen & King, 1996). The wisdom embedded in compassion and non-violence helps foster inclusive and pleasant societies, making them socially resilient and ethically grounded (Sivaraksa et al., 2009). Additionally, mindful practices of living enhance mental well-being and emotional strength, contributing to strong, cohesive communities. These movements have demonstrated how mindfulness and compassion can be applied to peacebuilding and community healing, especially in post-conflict settings, and proved that Buddhist communities today are not only spiritual; They also play a significant role in advancing the social aspect of sustainability.

Economic sustainability: The concept of economic sustainability is fundamentally based on the principle that all economic activities should be responsible and based on ethical practices throughout the entire production, distribution, and consumption process, to ensure the immediate requirement while balancing long-term viability (Elsawy & Marwan, 2023). A sustainable economy requires an ethical underpinning that integrates two aspects: First, a broader ethical foundation that considers human and non-human beings, future beings, and people around the world. Secondly, the well-being and societal welfare beyond rationality, efficiency, and growth (Becker, 2023). It is about managing natural and human resources efficiently, promoting stable and inclusive growth, and ensuring equal opportunities to all. Sustainable and inclusive growth aims to enhance the quality of life that benefits all segments of society (SDG 8). For business and economics, these are crucial for society as a whole (Dodge et al., 2012), which supports long-term societal well-being by providing stable employment and fair income distribution. It also promotes intergenerational equity, ensuring that future generations receive an economy capable of meeting their needs rather than merely maximizing current wants (Summers & Smith, 2014). This idea is similar to Buddhist wisdom on right livelihood, simplicity, and interdependence. This encourages individuals to do economic business in an ethical way, not harm others, and contribute positively to society. This principle supports the foundation of ethical economics that favors small-scale, community-oriented economies over extractive capitalist models (Venerable Dhammapitaka (P. A. Payutto), 1994) and



discourages greed, overconsumption, and material attachment, promoting a balanced, mindful, and needs-based approach to economic life (Zsolnai, 2011); (Loy, 2010). Reflecting these values, modern Buddhist-inspired initiatives often support ethical business practices, social entrepreneurship, and fair trade, which contribute to local self-reliance and sustainability. The idea of sufficiency economy endorsed by Thailand and the Gross National Happiness (GNH) approach of Bhutan are real-world experiences. Sufficiency economy focuses on balanced over self-interest, rationality, and self-immunity of individuals, societies, and the global community, adapting to changes with compassionate resilience on an ethical basis (UNDP, 2007), whereas Bhutan's (GNH) framework prioritizes spiritual, emotional, and environmental well-being over mere economic output (Ura et al., 2012). Grounded on the values of Buddhism, GNH appears as a global example of how a well-being-centered development approach has been able to shift emphasis from GDP to holistic prosperity.

Environmental Sustainability: Sustainable development emphasizes strategies that foster economic and social progress without ecological degradation and over-exploitation (Bhusal, 2025). The environmental aspect involves the responsible utilization and conservation of nature as a whole and the ecosystem. This idea ensures the conservation of natural resources, protection of ecosystems, and conservation of ecological processes. The essence of environmental sustainability is achieving balance for present and future generations (Brundtland, 1987). So, this principle embodies the interconnectedness of all life forms, including human beings, who are not separate from nature but are a part of a cosmic web. The growing connections between human and nature relations relate to the idea of wholeness (Beery et al., 2023), a thoughtful gratitude for nature that encourages ethical stewardship of the environment. Harming nature means harming ourselves, which is the essence of spiritual and indigenous practice rooted in the principle of non-violence, and extends beyond human relations to include all perceptive beings. This worldview guides us that man should engage with nature as the bee collects honey without disturbing the functioning of the ecosystem. It encourages the protection of biodiversity and ecosystems (Kaza, 2009). Numerous grassroots ecological movements have emerged across Asia and beyond, inspired by these ideas. However, there are challenges in integrating these Principles with SDG in Practice.

Buddhist philosophy, as a holistic approach, encompasses ethical living, environmental stewardship, and social well-being. The principles of moderation and responsible consumption, production, and fair distribution are closely related. Principles of interdependence focus on interconnectedness of all beings, align with interrelation and stewardship of the ecosystem (SDG 13,14, and 15). However, this kind of alignment between Buddhist teachings and sustainable development faces the challenge in the application of abstract ethics to real-life practices. The conflict between a capitalist society, prioritizing maximum self-satisfaction and profit, can be a barrier to the application of the Buddhist value of ethical business and moderate consumption. Individual transformation may not be equally applicable to all communities at the global level. There is also a risk of idealism overwhelming practical policy application. Bhutan's holistic approach



to development tries to exemplify the integration of Buddhist values into the national policy of Gross National Happiness (GNH) framework established in 2008, which comprises four pillars of holistic development: Good governance, equitable socio-economic development, environmental conservation, and preservation. The promotion of culture that aligns with (SDG 8), Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions (SDG 16). However, an alarming rate of unemployment and the diversified nature of development show the difficulties in harmonizing spiritual values with development.

Every society embodies its own worldview shaped by its people's values, particularly concerning the operation of its socio-economy and environment (Bhusal, 2025). These indigenous and spiritual cosmologies, focused on balance over accumulation, convey the leave no one behind principle of the SDGs. It provides a holistic basis for sustainable development rooted in its cultural practices. Conflicts arise when these values come into conflict with profit-driven global capitalism. A meaningful integration requires structural reforms with context-sensitive approaches to check the conflict and superficiality in application.

Inner Transformation and Sustainable Development

Sustainable development so far has focused on the external aspects, neglecting the internal dimensions of people (Blanc, 2025). Shifting from ignorance and craving to wisdom and compassion is referred to as inner transformation. This process creates a profound spiritual foundation for sustainable development (Loy, 2010); (Sivaraksa, 2011). Transformation enhanced mental discipline, ethics, and insight. It helps to reduce personal suffering and encourages social and ecological responsibility (Schroeder, 2012); (Schroeder, 2012). The three pillars, economic, social, and environmental development, of overall sustainability, align with the concept of the inner transformation. Phra Brahmagunabhorn (Venerable Dhammapitaka (P. A. Payutto), 1994) focuses on moderate consumption, simplicity, and reducing excessive desire and greediness that support economic sustainability. Compassion and ethical conduct enhance the ability to feel suffering and behave accordingly, and can lower social tensions by promoting inclusive, just, and peaceful communities (Queen & King, 1996). The Ideas of interdependence and mindfulness foster respect for all living things and ecological awareness (Kabilsingh, 1987). The entire process, bringing inner awakening with outer sustainability, acts as a catalyst for well-being. This process reflects the Wisdom spiral, where initial insight leads to ethical actions and sustainable lifestyles.

From Philosophy to Real-World Practice: Some Cases from Engaged Buddhism

Philosophy guides us to broaden our understanding by examining the fundamentals of the world around us. It helps to explore deep questions about human existence and its relation to other beings. Theories and philosophy combine to provide an ideal lens to think and analyze the underlying nature of reality. The acquired knowledge through experience and observation helps to refine or redefine earlier understandings and offer new insights that challenge the existing ones. They introduce the concept of paradigm shift, profoundly impacting the philosophy and existing concept by linking the social and historical context of scientific discovery (Kuhn, 2012). The journey from philosophy to practice in Buddhism is expressed through the triangle of Pariyatti (Study of Dhamma), Patipatti (Practice of Teaching), and Pativedha (Realization of Truth), as



highlighted in the Angutara Nikaya, and it is carried out by Engaged Buddhism. Buddhist monks in earlier days performed only a more reserved or ceremonial role in public affairs, but in the modern era, spiritual leaders are found to be proactive in social and ecological awareness, social empowerment, and peacebuilding. The GNH framework challenges dominant neoliberal paradigms and illustrates how Buddhist values can be institutionalized in governance. Buddhist communities across Asia have increasingly engaged in climate activism, reforestation efforts, and grassroots sustainable farming, demonstrating how religious ethics can motivate practical ecological actions (Dhiman & Marques, 2016); (Darlington, 2012). It is a major shift from non-involvement to moral engagement to transformative socio-economic and global ecological responsibility.

Buddhism across South Asia can be found as an evolving and dynamic force that integrates enduring ideologies of compassion, nonviolence, and interdependence with present-day movements for social reform and environmental conservation. Several examples of engaged Buddhism can be traced out as landmarks, such as the Gross National Happiness approach of Bhutan, the Sufficiency Economy approach of Thailand, the Sarvodaya movement in Sri Lanka, and the Thich Nhat Hanh movement in Vietnam. All these engaged Buddhist movements and practices integrate values of compassion, mindfulness, and interdependence into national policy to promote holistic well-being over economic growth. Engaged Buddhism is a very useful introduction to the contemporary movement of Buddhists who involve themselves with a variety of religious, socio-economic, and environmental activism (Queen & King, 1996). The Sufficiency Economy advanced by Thailand is based on the philosophy of the Middle Path, and tranquility as an illustration. Theravada Buddhism, with an applied approach to engaged Buddhism, tackles issues of economic equality, social injustice, and environmental preservation. This strategy is similar to sustainable development that has moral depth and empathy for social and ecological change. With group efforts on ethical consciousness, it provides a more comprehensive and deliberate aspect and thoughtful dimension to sustainability by integrating personal responsibility with collective action (Macy & Johnstone, 2012); (United Nations, 2023). With the ethical consciousness in financial planning, instead of immediate financial gain, it promotes independence, community cohesion, and long-term sustainability.

Another example of contemporary movement in Engaged Buddhism is pioneered by Thich Nhat Hanh as a continuation of the movement started by scholars such as Joanna Macy. To them, nothing exists independently, and all phenomena arise through mutual causation. Utilizing mindfulness and compassion, it addresses real-world issues, and Macy's (2012) work that integrates Buddhist insight with systems thinking and integrates ethical mindfulness into economic planning. It encourages self-reliance, community solidarity, and long-term sustainability rather than short-term profit (Kantabutra & Siebenhüner, 2011).

The GNH measures development using holistic domains, including conservation, well-being, and cultural preservation, with ethical governance and equitable development. This perspective shows how human flourishing is interconnected and inseparable from socio-cultural and environmental harmony (Ura et al., 2012).



Founded in 1958, the Sarvodaya Movement in Sri Lanka is another successful example of addressing poverty alleviation, conflict resolution, and women's empowerment that is directly linked with peace, justice, and strong community self-reliance, fostering inter-ethnic solidarity during and after Sri Lanka's civil war (Bond, 2004). However, donor dependency and scaling the community-driven approach into national policy are reported as constraints. Sarvodaya is a bottom-up approach to development, inspired by Buddhist and Gandhian ethics, that emphasizes compassion, collective well-being, and grassroots empowerment (Ariyaratne, 1999).

While taking the cases of Nepal, Buddhist activities in Lumbini, the birthplace of Buddha, demonstrate their contribution to peace education and sustainable development, and the community in Upper Mustang shows how Buddhist-inspired community practices for sustainable livelihood, biodiversity conservation, women empowerment, and preserving cultural heritages and identity (Regmi, 2024); (Pandey & Chetri, 2009). Similarly, Monasteries like Kopan and Nagi Gompa, and others, engaged to help people of all backgrounds by providing shelter, food, and emotional support after the 2015 Gurkha Earthquake. Buddhism in Kathmandu valley, by operating as lived tradition, is expressed through scholarship, heritage preservation, ecological and cultural production and preservation, and continues the city's intellectual and practical legacy.

Ambedkar's eco-centric ideas, "Nature for All and All for Nature," and the Dalit Buddhist movement in India focused on economic justice, political freedom, and moral transformation (Shastree, 1996). Indigenous Buddhists in Chit gong Hill, Bangladesh, are actively contributing to social reforms, environmental conservation, and peace negotiations in tribal conflicts. Ma Ba Tha is a less successful example among several successful Buddhist movements and was formally banned by Buddhist authorities in Myanmar due to concerns about political involvement and extremist rhetoric. The group later continued under other names like the Buddha Dhamma Charity Foundation, but retained similar networks and influence. However, restrictions in civil societies, political unrest, and groups like Ma Ba Tha, Buddhist movements, and creative activities are losing their strength in contributing to Inclusive and sustainable development (Bunte, 2023). These examples demonstrate that Buddhism is not confined to speculative philosophy but is also grounded in lived and observable social realities.

Originality and Body of Knowledge

The concept of the wisdom spiral, from the analysis, reflects that Inner wisdom is the whisper of truth, guides people in their journey of life through economic, social, and ecological spheres. Culmination of experiences, and the essence of being, the inner knowing with deep understanding and connection to oneself and the universe, leads to the higher wisdom. Fostering compassion, a sense of interdependence, self-awareness, and introspection encourages responsible behavior from personal values to collective well-being. The spiral metaphor, as presented in Figure 1, signifies that wisdom is a continuous progression from personal transformation to collective stewardship that bridges Buddhist philosophy with real-world practices. Figure 2 represents the expansion of Inner ethical transformation into community practices and extends to national and



global engagement. It shows the self-reinforcing cycle of development of wisdom as expressed in the Pali Canon. Right View (Samma Ditthi) leads to ethical conduct (Sila) and sustainable living practices (Samma Ajiva). Then it further leads to mental discipline (Samadhi), terminating in the realization of deeper wisdom (Panna). Right Livelihood (Samma Ajiva) is the pivot that mediates spiritual principles operationalizing with real-life situations. These orientations guide people and communities toward ethical economic activities, social harmony, and environmental responsibility that Buddhist teaching prioritizes.

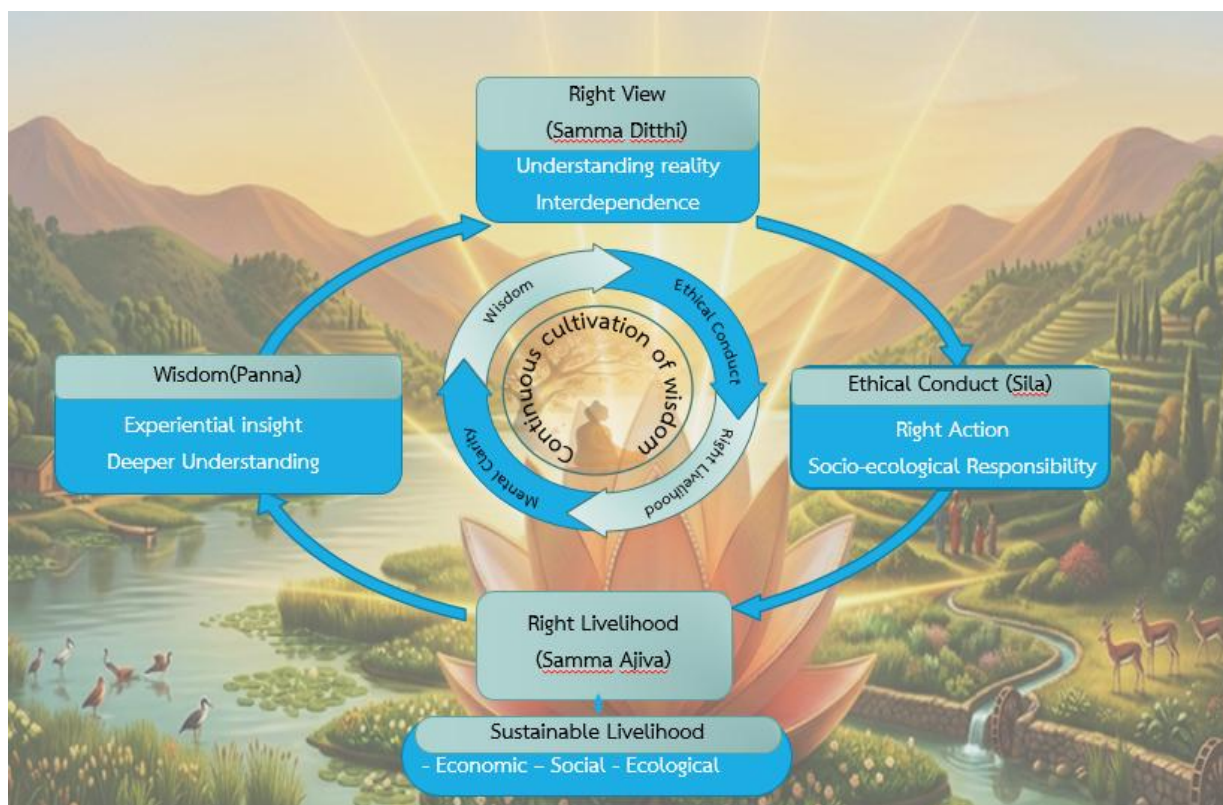


Figure 2 Wisdom spiral and Sustainability Bottom-line

The figure simultaneously demonstrates how inner transformation leads to social well-being, ecological care, and economic viability for present and future sustainability. The integration of the inner transformation with outer sustainability offers valuable insights in practice and for policy discourse to address global challenges. Critical evaluation of Bhutan's GNH approach, Sarvodaya in Sri Lanka, Sufficiency economy of Thailand, and various activities of engaged Buddhism and Soka Gakkai International show the practical examples of how Buddhist philosophy in practice is working, how they have synthesized the Buddhist philosophy, integrating with spirituality, practical community exercises, and sustainability discourse. The analysis demonstrates that Buddhist teachings are not limited to abstract ideas but are aggressively influential in development practices. For example, Gross National Happiness offers a state-level alternative to GDP, emphasizing ecological and social well-being. Thailand's Sufficiency Economy philosophy and Sri Lanka's Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement demonstrate how the Buddhist philosophy of moderation can guide societies and governments through economic policies. These exercises show how the



transformative potential of community is grounded in compassion and collective welfare, how initiatives taken by the monastery and Buddhist community highlight the role of spiritual and cultural establishments for economic development with sustainable tourism, ecological conservation, and cultural practice at both local and global levels. The analysis contributes to understanding how engaged Buddhism expanded its early role, focused on the pursuit of personal liberation by cultivating wisdom in a wider social context through meditation, moral discipline, and lived experiences. All these engagements have strong support from the philosophy of moderation, interdependence, and non-harming, which provides a practical guide for engagement with modern social and ecological challenges. They expanded their scope to social well-being, environmental protection, and global responsibility and helped to address persistent universal concerns regarding environmental justice, social harmony, human rights, and global peace.

Buddha-Dharma has always had the flexibility to adapt its skillful means to the historical, cultural, social, and economic context of a particular place and age. The rise of Buddhist soft power grounded in cultural diplomacy, moral advocacy, and spiritual leadership offers a peaceful alternative. The spiritual facet that respects the Natural system is the wisdom aspect of rising and supporting the natural ecosystem. This worldview views natural elements (Like Rivers, Mountains, Trees, or Others) not only as resources but also as spiritually significant beings. The lived cultural traditions rooted in the wisdom imitate how communities have traditionally practiced a self-sustained local community, how their values and culture respect the interdependence, community of being, and cohesion. The "I and You" relation with nature and all beings, and respect for the environment are the basic origins. Buddhist and indigenous worldviews are not just abstract ideas, but are practiced in daily life through cultural ceremonies, festivals, and rituals, as the Brundtland report "Our Common Future" also stresses spirituality as a potent force in promoting community well-being and ecological sustainability. The spirit of this report is that sustainable development cannot be achieved in isolation. It needs mutual trust, compassion, and ethical cooperation. Intercultural dialogue and collective responsibility for understanding and resolving conflicts for the collective well-being.

These are the original contributions of the study to the theoretical discourse, in addition to the literature, as well as policy implications. The idea that all life is interconnected and is treated as a deep moral and ethical practice poses a separate framework for sustainable development, and focuses on moderation as an alternative to the prevailing one. Beyond technical growth, it advocates the importance of morality, harmony, and the sense of interconnectedness of all life. It is not only about preserving resources but also about cultivating peace, reducing suffering, and living in harmony with all forms of life. Compassion, interdependence, nonviolence, and the doctrine of moderation combine to serve as guiding principles for promoting social peace and international cooperation. Though wider application across diverse contexts remains essential to develop its broader acceptance and impact, Buddhist approaches seem to be a suitable means for maintaining the triple bottom lines of sustainable development and peacebuilding processes. However, growth-centered critiques often remain grounded in abstract normative principles, while the inherent complexity of operationalizing holistic and systems-based approaches constrains



their broader application, though there is no significant contradiction identified in the philosophical foundation of Buddhism and its application.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Returning to the philosophical questions and practical approach to sustainability, findings of the analysis showed that the sustainable development framework is based on environmental, economic, and social dimensions. Overemphasis on growth with a technological and policy solution overlooks ecological boundaries and ethical responsibilities. However, it is still dominating the sustainability framework. The concept of sufficiency economy discards boundless growth and focuses on ethical trade with local resilience and claims that the earth has enough to meet everyone's needs, but not endless greed. The study concludes that Buddhist teaching and practices place ethical values above profit and promote ethical economic behavior. It is consistent with compassion, non-harm, and well-being, which implies that ethical values should guide economic action and profit. So, the sustainability framework should view nature as having its fundamental value, and humans as stewards, not exploiters, often keeping the "I and You" relationship rather than the "I and It" with Nature. Wealth and prosperity are acceptable when they are free from greed, sustainability requires more than technological advancement, and is possible when economic activity respects ecological limits and social well-being. Individual choice should align with collective responsibility. Sustainability is not value-neutral and requires ethical transformation rather than purely technical solutions. This philosophy urges a shift from extraction to stewardship, self-interest to shared well-being, and ensuring fairness within and across generations. The ongoing critical engagement with real-world practices is necessary to have an ethical foundation, as presented with the concept of the wisdom spiral that connects inner transformation with outer sustainability. The evidence-based practices bridge the gap between normative ideals and practical application. With these conclusions, the study recommends that the sustainable development framework should focus on an ethics-centered framework that prioritizes compassion, sufficiency, ecological stewardship, and shared well-being over purely growth-driven policy and technological approaches. Public policy in South Asian countries can prioritize the well-being of the most vulnerable people, ecological balance, and community participation in the conservation of the local ecosystem, recognizing the interconnectedness of the triple bottom line of sustainability. Scientific research and innovation integrating indigenous knowledge can create context-sensitive solutions, where insights from community practices co-evolve with advanced evidence and findings reflecting the wisdom spiral. Further research is recommended, examining the real-world practice of people at the community level, contextualizing the challenges, and enriching current approaches to the global SDG discourse, particularly for South Asia.

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