



Review Article

Integration of Theravāda Buddhist wisdom and virtue for sustainable development in the 21st century

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Article Info

Article history:

Received 5 September 2024

Revised 21 October 2024

Accepted 28 October 2024

Available online 12 November 2025

Keywords:

21st Century,
Buddhist integration,
sustainable development,
Theravāda,
virtue,
wisdom

Abstract

This paper aims to point out the integration of Theravāda Buddhist wisdom and virtue for sustainable development in the 21st century. Buddhism, with its rich philosophical and ethical foundations, has long been recognized for its potential to contribute to personal and societal well-being. However, in the face of contemporary challenges such as globalization, rapid technological advancements, and environmental crises, there is a need to adapt Buddhist teachings and practices to effectively address these issues. The integration proposed in this paper advocates for the specific Buddhist teachings into the sustainable development framework, focusing specifically on the cultivation of wisdom and virtue. It recognizes the interconnectedness of individuals, societies, and the environment, and seeks to foster holistic development that balances material progress with spiritual well-being. Drawing on traditional Theravāda teachings, the integration emphasizes the importance of mindfulness, wisdom, and ethical conduct as the foundation for personal and collective transformation. It explores how these principles can be applied in various spheres of life, including education, economics, governance, and environmental stewardship. The integration of Buddhism into sustainable development involves adapting traditional practices to contemporary contexts while preserving their essence and authenticity. Integrating Buddhism into the sustainable development discourse thus contributes to the holistic well-being of people and the planet in the 21st century and beyond.

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Introduction

In the 21st century, societies around the world are grappling with numerous challenges, ranging from environmental degradation to social inequality and technological disruptions. The discussion topic at the 76th United Nations General Assembly was mainly on sustainable society and sustainable development (Heal with Buddhism, 2021). The sustainable development goals (SDGs), define the world we desire, and the aim of SDGs is to transform the world, to end poverty and inequality, to protect the planet, and to ensure that all people enjoy health, justice, and prosperity (World Health Organization, 2023). The Sustainable Development Goals are designed to be a blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. The teachings of Buddha are seen identical with several markers of the SDGs (Dhakhwa, 2020). Buddhism has the potential to link sustainable development at all levels, i.e., individual, national, and global (Verma, 2023). Thus, to achieve the SDGs, Buddhists must develop wisdom and virtue in order to live with happiness and harmony in the world we desire. The adaptation and integration of Buddhism with the indigenous, self-reforming and directing activities to the secular life is reported. Furthermore, Buddhist teachings not only have an impact on Buddhists and the believers but also have the power to spread to the society (Pham & Nikolaeva, 2021) in various dimensions. Considering the academic gap, though many papers focused on integrating Buddhism as a solution, a few focused on an integrated approach with specific principles of wisdom and morality to reflect holistic well-being, ecological awareness, and social harmony. As these issues continue to unfold, there is a growing recognition that sustainable development requires a holistic approach that encompasses not only economic progress but also the cultivation of wisdom and virtue within individuals and communities. In this context, Buddhism, with its profound philosophical and ethical teachings, offers valuable insights and practices that can contribute to the sustainable development agenda.

This paper presents an integration of Theravāda Buddhist wisdom and virtue for sustainable development in the 21st century. Theravāda Buddhism, originating in South Asia, is now widely practiced in various parts of the world and is known for its emphasis on personal transformation, ethical conduct, and the pursuit of wisdom (Bodhi, 2005). The integration of Buddhism into the sustainable development discourse can enhance the potential of Buddhist teachings to harness multifaceted

challenges in the modern era. The integration recognizes the need to adapt Buddhist principles and practices to the contemporary context without compromising their essence and authenticity. It seeks to explore how Buddhism can contribute to sustainable development in areas such as education, economics, governance, and environmental stewardship. By integrating the wisdom of Buddhism, individuals and communities can develop a more holistic and compassionate approach to these domains, leading to greater well-being and flourishing for both people and the planet.

In Buddhism, the Noble Eightfold Path can also be summarized as the Three Noble Disciplines of moral conduct or discipline (*sīla*), meditation or concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*) (Davids & Stede, 2009). The core of the integration is the understanding that sustainable development is not solely about material progress but also about the cultivation of inner qualities and values that promote harmonious coexistence and long-term flourishing. Buddhism offers a rich array of teachings and practices that emphasize mindfulness, wisdom, and ethical conduct as transformative forces for personal and societal change. By integrating these principles into sustainable development efforts, it becomes possible to foster a more balanced and sustainable approach to progress.

Furthermore, this integration acknowledges the importance of interfaith dialogue and collaboration in the pursuit of sustainable development goals. It recognizes that Buddhism is just one of many spiritual and philosophical traditions that can contribute to a more holistic understanding of sustainable development. By engaging in dialogue and collaboration with diverse stakeholders, including practitioners of other faiths, policymakers, and civil society organizations, Buddhism can enrich the sustainable development discourse and foster a more inclusive and pluralistic approach to addressing global challenges.

In conclusion, an integration of Buddhism for the sustainable development of wisdom and virtue within the Theravāda tradition in the 21st century can be processed by integrating Buddhist principles and practices into the sustainable development framework. Individuals and communities can cultivate wisdom, compassion, and ethical responsibility, and thus contribute to a more holistic and sustainable future. This integration recognizes the interconnectedness of individuals, societies, and the environment and offers a comprehensive framework that promotes the well-being of people and the planet in the face of contemporary challenges.

Wisdom and Virtue: What are They in Theravāda Buddhist Perspective?

In Theravāda Buddhism, on one hand, the concept of wisdom holds a profound significance on the path to enlightenment. Wisdom, or “*paññā*” according to Paññā Sutta meaning “insight” or “understand” (Masefield, 2000), is regarded as one of the three essential components of the Noble Eightfold Path, which is the path towards liberation from suffering and the attainment of enlightenment (Ñanamoli, 2010), alongside ethical conduct and concentration. It encompasses a deep understanding of the true nature of existence, the causes of suffering, and the path to liberation. Wisdom in Theravāda Buddhism is augmented through various practices, including mindfulness, meditation, and the study of Buddhist teachings, such as the Four Noble Truths, and the Three Characteristics of Existence are impermanence, satisfactoriness, and non-self (Ñanamoli, 2010).

This wisdom is not simply theoretical knowledge but requires direct experiential realization through one’s own insight and discernment. It involves seeing things as they truly are, free from delusions and misconceptions. By developing wisdom, practitioners can gain liberation from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, transcending suffering and attaining the state of enlightenment, known as Nirvana. Wisdom in Theravāda Buddhism is not limited to intellectual understanding but is a transformative and liberating force that leads to profound insight and ultimate freedom. Wisdom (*paññā*), with ethical discipline and meditative concentration, is one of the three main aspects of Buddhist training. It encompasses the right view and right resolve factors of the path, especially the form of right view that goes beyond the right belief. It not only guides other aspects of the path but is also perfected at the end of the path (Ñanamoli, 2010). It also needs to be in balance with the faculty of faith.

On the other hand, virtue, generally known as “*sīla*” according to Sīlavanta Sutta meaning “virtuous hermits” (*sīlavanto*) (Woodward, 1979) or “*guṇa-dhamma*” in Theravāda Buddhism, is a foundational concept that plays a crucial role in the spiritual development and liberation of individuals. It encompasses a set of ethical principles and practices aimed at cultivating moral integrity, compassionate action, and harmonious living. The concept of virtue holds significant importance in Theravāda Buddhism, as it provides a framework for personal conduct and serves as a guide for practitioners on their path to enlightenment.

Theravāda Buddhism emphasizes the cultivation of virtue as a means to purify the mind, reduce suffering,

and create conditions conducive to spiritual growth. The teaching of Theravāda Buddhism upholds the equality of all sentient beings, and directs people to a virtuous and blessed life (Chung, 2023). The Five Precepts, a fundamental aspect of virtuous conduct, outline the ethical principles that practitioners strive to uphold. These precepts include refraining from harming living beings, stealing, engaging in sexual misconduct, lying, and intoxication. By adhering to these precepts, individuals develop a sense of moral responsibility and contribute to the well-being of oneself and others.

Practicing virtue in Theravāda Buddhism extends beyond mere adherence to external rules. It involves developing inner qualities and attitudes that support virtuous behavior. Mindfulness, an essential practice in Buddhism, plays a crucial role in cultivating virtue. Through mindfulness, individuals become aware of their thoughts, speech, and actions, allowing them to make conscious choices aligned with virtuous principles. By being in the present moment, practitioners can observe their intentions and motivations, ensuring they arise from a place of compassion and wisdom (Anuruddhā, 1994) at that particular moment.

Virtuous qualities in the sense of *guṇa-dhamma* such as generosity, compassion, patience, honesty, and loving-kindness can give broader implications than just morality and are highly valued in Theravāda Buddhism. Generosity, or “*dāna*” involves the practice of giving without attachment, cultivating selflessness and compassion towards others. Compassion, known as “*karuṇā*” is the deep understanding of the suffering of oneself and others, coupled with the active desire to alleviate it. Patience, or “*khanti*” allows individuals to endure difficulties and challenges with equanimity, fostering inner resilience. Honesty, or “*saccā*” involves speaking truthfully and living with integrity, while loving-kindness, or “*mettā*” is the cultivation of unconditional love and goodwill towards all beings (Buddhaghosa, 1969) on the basis that everyone needs love.

The practice of virtue in Theravāda Buddhism is being challenged in modern society. The complexities of modern life and societal pressures can pose obstacles to upholding virtuous conduct. Nonetheless, the teachings of Theravāda Buddhism can provide guidance on how to navigate these challenges. Regular meditation practice, which strengthens mindfulness and self-awareness, enables individuals to overcome temptations and make wise choices aligned with virtuous principles. Additionally, engaging with a supportive spiritual community can offer guidance, encouragement, and accountability in the cultivation of virtue.

The benefits of practicing virtue in Theravāda Buddhism extend beyond personal well-being. By embodying virtuous qualities and engaging in compassionate action, individuals contribute to the welfare and happiness of society as a whole. The cultivation of virtue creates a ripple effect, inspiring others to follow a path of ethical conduct and compassionate living. It promotes harmony, fosters social cohesion, and reduces conflict, ultimately contributing to a more compassionate and just world.

In conclusion, wisdom (*paññā*) is one of the three essential components of the Noble Eightfold Path. Wisdom is an important aspect of Buddhist practice because it enables individuals to see the true nature of reality and overcome the ignorance that causes suffering. While virtue (*sīla* or *guṇa-dhamma*) holds great significance in the spiritual journey of individuals, it provides a moral compass and ethical framework for practitioners, guiding their thoughts, speech, and actions. By cultivating virtue, individuals purify their minds, reduce suffering, and create the necessary conditions for spiritual growth. Moreover, the practice of virtue extends beyond the individual, contributing to the well-being of society and fostering a more compassionate and harmonious world.

Buddhism Integration for Sustainable Development

Sustainable development refers to a holistic approach to societal progress that seeks to meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It recognizes the interdependence of environmental, social, and economic aspects, and aims to achieve a balance for long-term well-being.

Sustainable development enables us to realize dependent origination of things in the sense that the arisen certain problems caused by certain originations and affecting us can be sustainably solved. For instance, environmental degradation can have adverse social and economic consequences, while social inequality and economic instability can hinder environmental sustainability. Achieving sustainable development requires a comprehensive and integrated approach that addresses all three dimensions simultaneously, recognizing their interdependence and seeking solutions that promote harmony and balance among them.

Buddhism integration refers to the process of incorporating Buddhist wisdom and virtue into one's daily life, beliefs, or worldview. It often involves applying Buddhist teachings such as mindfulness or sometimes meditation techniques, compassion, non-violence, dependent origination, and so on, to

promote holistic well-being, foster social harmony, and cultivate ecological awareness. Integration of Theravāda Buddhism with contemporary frameworks for sustainable development can provide a valuable approach to address the pressing environmental, social, and economic challenges of our time. Furthermore, family values, personal beliefs and governance aspects are reported to be crucial drivers of the decision to pursue contributions to sustainable development goals (Vu et al., 2023). Following are some proposals for integrating Theravāda Buddhism with sustainable development: Theravāda Buddhism emphasizes mindful consumption and contentment with simple living. By integrating Buddhist teachings on non-attachment and moderation, individuals can adopt sustainable consumption habits, reduce waste, and minimize their ecological footprint (Tu & Thien, 2019). This integration can be supported by campaigns promoting mindful consumption, eco-friendly practices, and sustainable lifestyles. According to Buddhist religious logic, the behavior of family firms could be changed from a self-interest market logic to a stewardship perspective of market logic such as enabling family business leaders to do good for others based on values and beliefs (Vu et al., 2023). As a practicing religion, Buddhism may well be able to provide insights on practicing models as a solution to sustain society, the environment, and businesses (Sharma et al., 2023).

Mindfulness and meditation play a crucial role in cultivating wisdom and self-awareness in various spiritual traditions, including Theravāda Buddhism. They provide powerful tools for individuals to deepen their understanding of themselves and the nature of reality, leading to transformative insights and personal growth. In Theravāda Buddhism, mindfulness and meditation are integral parts of the Eightfold Path, a path that not only addresses the cessation of suffering, the extinction of kamma and the attainment of liberation but also provides a comprehensive framework for achieving a balanced, healthy, and meaningful life according to Buddhist teachings (Aggadhammo et al., 2024; Bodhi, 2010). Therefore, mindfulness and meditation may well be the foundation for the cultivation of wisdom and self-awareness, essential elements in the journey towards enlightenment. Furthermore, in the Buddhist scriptures, the effect of meditation is happiness both physical and mental by helping calm the mind, quenching suffering and cleansing the mind (Anuro et al., 2019). Therefore, by cultivating mindfulness and meditation, individuals develop a deep understanding of their own minds, gain insights into the nature of reality, and cultivate qualities of wisdom, compassion, and inner peace.

Theravāda Buddhism's teachings on interconnectedness and impermanence provide a philosophical basis for environmental stewardship. By integrating Buddhist principles with environmental policies and initiatives, there can be greater emphasis on conservation, protection of biodiversity, sustainable resource management, and the promotion of renewable energy sources. Buddhist monastic communities can serve as role models by implementing sustainable practices in their daily lives.

Moreover, integrating Theravāda Buddhism's ethical principles into contemporary business practices can foster socially responsible and environmentally sustainable approaches. Buddhist teachings on honesty, compassion, and non-harm can guide businesses in promoting fair trade, sustainable supply chains, responsible investment, and corporate social responsibility. This integration can be facilitated through the development of ethical business guidelines inspired by Buddhist principles.

Therefore, Theravāda Buddhism's emphasis on compassion and social justice can be integrated into efforts to address inequality, poverty, and social exclusion (Glies & Yetunde, 2020). By incorporating Buddhist values into social welfare policies, development programs, and humanitarian initiatives, there can be a greater focus on addressing systemic injustice, promoting equitable access to education and healthcare, and supporting marginalized communities.

Integrating mindfulness practices into governance and decision-making processes can enhance ethical leadership and promote long-term sustainable outcomes (Rieckmann, 2017). By incorporating mindfulness training for policymakers, politicians, and civil servants, decision-making can become more conscious, compassionate, and attuned to the interconnectedness of social, economic, and environmental dimensions. Mindful governance can facilitate inclusive and participatory decision-making processes that prioritize the well-being of all stakeholders.

Integrating Theravāda Buddhism's teachings on mindfulness and ethical values into education systems can foster the development of socially and environmentally conscious individuals. Incorporating mindfulness training into school curricula and educational institutions can equip students with the tools to cultivate wisdom, compassion, and responsible citizenship. This integration can support the nurturing of future generations who are committed to sustainable development.

By integrating Theravāda Buddhism with contemporary frameworks for sustainable development, we can tap into the profound insights and practices of Buddhism to address the complex challenges of our time. This integration provides a holistic and values-based approach that

promotes the well-being of individuals, society, and the natural world, fostering a more sustainable and compassionate future.

The Role of Wisdom and Virtue in Theravāda Buddhism

The importance of mindfulness and ethical decision-making in promoting sustainability and well-being cannot be overstated. These two pillars are essential for creating a harmonious and balanced relationship with ourselves, others, and the environment. Here is an exploration of their significance: Mindfulness cultivates present-moment awareness and non-judgmental observation of our thoughts, emotions, and actions. By being fully present, we become more attuned to the interconnectedness of all phenomena, including our relationship with the natural world (Germer et al., 2013). This heightened awareness allows us to recognize the impact of our choices and behaviors on the environment and others. Virtue (Germer et al., 2013): Ethical decision-making, guided by moral principles and values, is crucial for promoting sustainability and well-being. When we make choices aligned with ethical considerations, we contribute to the greater good and the flourishing of all beings. By combining mindfulness and ethical decision-making, we cultivate a deep understanding of the interconnectedness between our actions, sustainability, and well-being. Mindfulness provides the foundation for self-awareness, while ethical decision-making guides us to act in accordance with our values and the principles of compassion, non-harming, and sustainability. Together, they empower us to make choices that promote the flourishing of ourselves, others, and the natural world, leading to a more sustainable and harmonious future.

Outcomes of Buddhist Integration for Sustainable Development of Wisdom and Virtue in Theravāda Buddhism

The integration of Theravāda Buddhism into sustainable development efforts brings forth numerous benefits that promote holistic well-being, foster social harmony, and cultivate ecological awareness. Theravāda Buddhism emphasizes the cultivation of virtue (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*), leading to holistic well-being. By integrating Buddhist principles into sustainable development, individuals and communities can experience enhanced mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. This integration promotes a balanced and harmonious approach to life, addressing not only material needs but also the deeper aspects of human existence.

First, the wisdom-integration aspect; Theravāda Buddhism emphasizes wisdom framework rooted in mindfulness and meditation practices to promote holistic well-being and to foster inner peace and resilience. Integrating these practices into sustainable development efforts equips individuals with tools to navigate challenges and setbacks with equanimity. This inner resilience enables individuals to face the complexities of sustainable development work with clarity, patience, and compassion (Schonert-Reichl & Roeser, 2016).

Second, the virtue-integration aspect; Theravāda Buddhism provides a strong ethical framework rooted in compassion (*karuṇā*), non-violence (*ahiṃsā*), and interdependence (*paticca-samuppāda*). Integrating this ethical foundation into sustainable development efforts ensures that the pursuit of sustainability aligns with principles of social justice, environmental stewardship, and the well-being of all beings. This integration fosters a values-driven approach to sustainable development, addressing the root causes of social and environmental issues. Theravāda Buddhism promotes social harmony by emphasizing empathy, compassion, and equality (Skilling, 2012). By combining these principles to enhance sustainable development efforts, communities can work together towards inclusive and equitable solutions. This combination fosters social cohesion, bridges divisions, and promotes participatory decision-making processes, ensuring that marginalized voices are heard and considered.

Theravāda Buddhism's teachings on interconnectedness and impermanence provide a strong foundation for ecological awareness and conservation. These teachings can be integrated with sustainable development efforts. Thus, an increased focus on environmental preservation, sustainable resource management, and ecological restoration can be obtained. The integration can cultivate a deep appreciation for the natural world and a sense of responsibility to protect and sustain it for future generations (Borchert, 2018). Figure 1 shows the outcomes of Buddhist integration for the sustainable development of wisdom and virtue.

From Figure 1, integrating Theravāda Buddhism into sustainable development efforts encourages individuals to become engaged citizens, actively participating in shaping sustainable and just societies. This integration fosters a sense of personal responsibility and empowerment, inspiring individuals to take action for positive change in their communities and the world. It encourages individuals to align their daily actions with their values and principles. Overall, the integration of Theravāda Buddhism into sustainable development

efforts has the potential to promote holistic well-being, foster social harmony, and cultivate ecological awareness. By incorporating Buddhist principles into sustainable development frameworks, individuals and communities can work towards a more sustainable, equitable, and compassionate world. This integration offers a profound pathway to address the interconnected challenges of our time and cultivate a more harmonious relationship with ourselves, others, and the environment.

Conclusion

The integration of Buddhism into sustainable development efforts, specifically within the Theravāda tradition, holds immense potential for promoting wisdom, virtue, and sustainable well-being in the 21st century. By incorporating Buddhist principles and practices into contemporary frameworks, we can address the crucial challenges of our time in a holistic and transformative manner. Through the cultivation of wisdom, individuals can gain a deeper understanding of the interconnected nature of existence, leading to a greater appreciation for the environment and the imperative of sustainable living. The ethical principles of Buddhism, such as compassion, non-harming, and interdependence, can be the guidelines for decision-making processes that impact social justice, equity, and stewardship of resources.

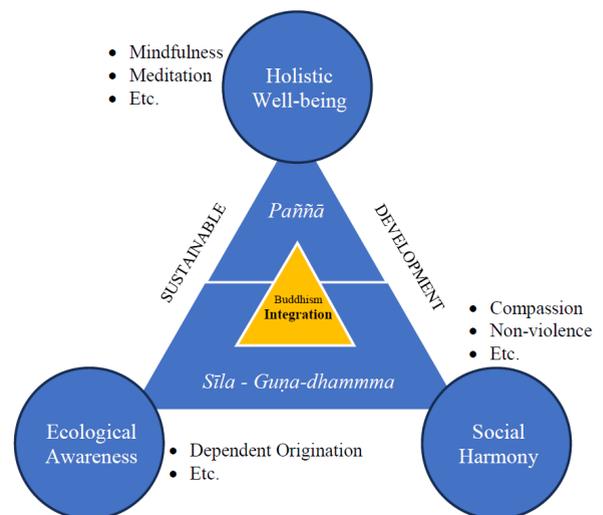


Figure 1 The outcomes of Buddhist integration for the sustainable development of wisdom and virtue

The integration of Buddhism and sustainable development effort offers numerous benefits, including the promotion of holistic well-being, both individually and collectively. By practicing mindfulness and meditation, individuals can cultivate inner peace, resilience, and self-awareness, leading to better mental and emotional stability as well as spiritual well-being. Social harmony is fostered through principles of empathy, compassion, and inclusivity, ensuring that sustainable development efforts prioritize the needs and voices of all communities. Moreover, the integration of Theravāda Buddhism into sustainable development promotes ecological awareness and conservation. By embracing the teachings of impermanence and interconnectedness, individuals are able to develop a deep sense of responsibility towards the environment, leading to sustainable practices and the preservation of natural resources for future generations.

In conclusion, the integration of Buddhism into sustainable development aligns timeless wisdom with contemporary challenges. By incorporating the principles and practices of Theravāda Buddhism, we can foster a more sustainable, compassionate, wise, and better life quality in the future. This integration offers a transformative pathway towards individual well-being, social harmony, and ecological stewardship, and also guides us in contributing a more harmonious relationship with ourselves, others, and the environment in the 21st century and beyond.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Funding

This paper is part of the research project in 2024 B.E. “A Theory of Buddhism Integration for Sustainable Development of Wisdom and Virtue in the 21st Century,” funded by Thailand Science Research and Innovation Fund.

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