



## **Buddhist Compassion in Action: Shared Responsibility for Human Development**

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**Abstract:** Buddhism naturally evokes ideas of human welfare, mutual respect, and compassion. The concept of shared responsibility in Buddhist thought extends beyond individual action, emphasizing collective efforts that transcend national, ethnic, and cultural boundaries. It presents a model where compassion is not merely an internal sentiment but is actively expressed through social engagement. This article explores Buddhist compassion in action and its relevance to human development, highlighting core Buddhist principles such as the Four Noble Truths, Dependent Origination, the Noble Eightfold Path, and the Bodhisattva ideal. These teachings offer a framework for addressing contemporary challenges, including poverty, inequality, social justice, environmental sustainability, and mental health.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, philosophy, compassion, human development, karuna, world-view

### **1. Introduction**

Buddhism, emanating from India, spread its wings to several geographical locations in Asia. Its acceptability and accommodation in faraway land is the most amazing story of human civilization. Its arrival and the continuity is another intriguing fact as Buddhism went to those far flung areas where they already had a set system of civilisation and belief system. This was majorly due to the profound philosophical and ethical teachings of Buddhism that emphasized compassion (karuṇā) as a fundamental principle for both individual and collective well-being. Central to the Buddhist worldview is the belief in interconnectedness and the understanding that the well-being of an individual is inextricably linked to the well-being of others and the environment. In this context, Buddhist compassion extends beyond mere empathy to active engagement in alleviating suffering and promoting human development. This active form of compassion, known as compassion in action, reflects a deep sense of shared responsibility for the welfare of all sentient beings, and provides an ethical framework for human development. Its acceptability and accommodation in faraway land is the most amazing story of human civilization. Its arrival and the continuity is another intriguing fact as Buddhism went to those far flung areas where they already had a set system of civilisations and belief systems. This was majorly due to the profound philosophical and ethical teachings of Buddhism that emphasized compassion (karuṇā) as a fundamental principle for both individual and collective well-being. Central to the Buddhist worldview is the belief in interconnectedness and the understanding that the well-being of an individual is inextricably linked to the well-being of others and the environment. In this context, Buddhist compassion extends beyond mere empathy to active engagement in alleviating suffering and promoting human



development. This active form of compassion, known as compassion in action, reflects a deep sense of shared responsibility for the welfare of all sentient beings, and provides an ethical framework for human development.

It is striking and noteworthy that the establishment of Buddhist ideas was never meant to cross the seas or lands out of India. Even Buddha's feet never set on the non-Jambudvīpa. Buddhist compassion, known as *karuṇā*, is a central theme in Buddhist teachings and practice. It refers to the deep empathy for the suffering of others and the sincere wish to alleviate that suffering. The concept of compassion in Buddhism is not just an abstract ideal, but a call to action—"compassion in action." This ideal is manifest across Buddhist Asia in various forms, from individual acts of kindness to large-scale social initiatives. Here are some key ways in which compassion is expressed and practiced in Buddhist Asia:

## 1. Monastic Community and Public Engagement

Monastic communities play a crucial role in fostering compassion-driven societies. In Theravāda Buddhist countries such as Cambodia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar, monks serve as exemplars of compassionate living. The daily alms-giving ritual (*pindapata*) fosters generosity (*dāna*) among laypeople, reinforcing mutual care within communities. Buddhist monasteries frequently provide education, healthcare, and social services, demonstrating a commitment to social welfare. One example can be found at Wat Phra Dhammakaya Thailand (Apinya, 1998). Wat Phra Dhammakaya engages in large-scale humanitarian work, including education and disaster relief. Almost from the beginning, the temple has had solid establishment support, including from royal and senior military circles (Dubus, 2018). The temple's student summer training program, known as *Dhammadayada*, received support from the Kaeng Krachan Special Military Camp, the Department of Universities under the Ministry of Education, and the Department of Public Works. Additionally, prominent Thai corporations, including the Central Group, Bangkok Bank, Thai Farmers Bank, and Siam Commercial Bank owned by the Crown Property Bureau, have contributed to the temple's ceremonies or training initiatives in various ways (Jackson, 1989). Wat Phra Dhammakaya established a boarding school for novice monks, where children, primarily from rural areas, were sent by their families to receive training in discipline and order while living as novices for a period of one to three years. Young monks, most of whom held at least a bachelor's degree, with several possessing master's degrees, worked daily on computers to digitize the fifty-six volumes of the *Tipitaka* (the Buddhist Pali Canon). Many of these monks were initially recruited through the *Dhammadayada* training program (Dubus, 2018).

Another important example here that cannot be missed at all is that of Maha Ghosananda and his *Dhammayietras*. Maha Ghosananda's *Dhammayietras* (*Dhammayātrā*) peace walks played a crucial role in Cambodia's post-war reconciliation, embodying the Buddhist tradition of meditative walking to foster healing and social transformation. The first march in 1992 covered 125 miles from refugee camps to Phnom Penh, spreading messages of peace and drawing thousands of supporters, including soldiers who temporarily laid down their weapons to receive blessings. The second walk in 1993, held amid election-related violence, faced significant danger as marchers were attacked, yet their resilience inspired a 90% voter turnout. The third march entered western Cambodia's conflict zones, where participants were caught in Khmer Rouge crossfire, resulting in the deaths of three monks and a nun; survivors were taken captive but later released after their captors, exhausted from decades of war, expressed a desire for peace. Subsequent *Dhammayietras* addressed pressing national issues: in 1995, marchers campaigned against landmines, gathering



over 20,000 signatures for a global ban; in 1996, they focused on deforestation, traveling through damaged regions and planting 2,000 trees; and in 1997, they promoted reconciliation, even engaging with former Khmer Rouge leaders like Ieng Sary, whose plea for forgiveness sparked debate but reaffirmed Ghosananda's belief in the power of Buddhist compassion. Through his fearless advocacy, Ghosananda rekindled hope in a war-torn society, encouraging Cambodians to publicly embrace peace. He compared peacemaking to breathing, an unceasing effort essential for ensuring that conflict does not return (Poethig, 2002).

## **2. Social Activism and Buddhist Organizations**

Buddhist compassion extends beyond individual acts to organized efforts addressing systemic issues. Some of the organisations are as follows-

The Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement, founded in Sri Lanka in 1958 by Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne, is a grassroots Buddhist development initiative rooted in the principles of self-reliance, collective effort, and compassion (Ariyaratne, 1987). Inspired by Buddhist and Gandhian ideals (Ariyaratne, 1996), the movement seeks to uplift communities through sustainable development, education, and social welfare, emphasizing a holistic approach to human well-being. Sarvodaya operates in over 15,000 villages across Sri Lanka, engaging in diverse projects such as community-driven economic development, disaster relief, environmental conservation, and conflict resolution. The movement has been particularly active in post-war reconciliation efforts, facilitating peace dialogues between Sinhalese and Tamil communities. It played a crucial role in tsunami relief efforts after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, rebuilding homes and providing emergency aid. Sarvodaya also promotes eco-friendly initiatives, such as reforestation projects and renewable energy programs, aligning with Buddhist environmental ethics. Their Deshodaya (National Awakening) program fosters participatory democracy and local governance, encouraging communities to take charge of their own development. Through microfinance schemes and vocational training, the movement empowers marginalized groups, particularly women and youth, to achieve economic independence. Sarvodaya's philosophy—awakening of self and society through shared labor (Shramadana)—demonstrates Buddhist compassion in action, making it one of the most influential and enduring Buddhist development movements in the world.

The International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB), founded in 1989 by Thich Nhat Hanh and Sulak Sivaraksa, is a global network that integrates Buddhist teachings with social activism, addressing environmental sustainability, human rights, economic justice, and peacebuilding. INEB works through a decentralized model, collaborating with monks, scholars, and lay practitioners to promote compassionate social change (Queen et al., 1996). One of its notable initiatives is the Eco-Temple Project, which encourages Buddhist monasteries to adopt sustainable practices such as solar energy, organic farming, and waste reduction. The network has been deeply involved in interfaith dialogues and peacebuilding efforts in conflict zones, such as Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Cambodia, advocating for nonviolent resolutions and reconciliation. INEB has also launched youth empowerment programs, such as the Young Bodhisattva Program, which provides leadership training for young activists in Asia. In response to economic injustices, the network supports fair trade initiatives and sustainable livelihoods, particularly for marginalized communities, including refugees and indigenous peoples. Additionally, INEB played a crucial role in advocating for democracy and human rights in Myanmar, calling for justice for persecuted groups, including the Rohingya. Its humanitarian projects extend to disaster relief efforts, such as supporting victims of the 2011 Thailand floods and the 2015 Nepal earthquake. INEB's commitment to compassionate action, ethical leadership, and social transformation makes it a leading force in applying Buddhist principles to contemporary global challenges.



The Tzu Chi Foundation, established in 1966 by Dharma Master Cheng Yen in Taiwan, has evolved into a global humanitarian organization dedicated to various charitable missions. One of its earliest initiatives was the "Tzu Chi Medical Mission," inspired in 1970 when Cheng Yen observed the link between poverty and illness (O'Neill, 2010). This led to the opening of a free clinic in Hualien in 1972. In 1986, the foundation expanded its medical services by inaugurating its first hospital in Hualien, addressing the healthcare needs of Taiwan's eastern coast. Recognizing the importance of medical education, Tzu Chi established the Tzu Chi College of Medicine in 1994, which later became Tzu Chi University in 2000. Beyond healthcare, the foundation has been active in disaster relief worldwide, providing aid in response to events such as the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the 2015 Nepal earthquake, and Hurricane Harvey in 2017. Additionally, Tzu Chi's commitment to environmental protection is evident through its recycling programs and promotion of sustainable practices. Today, Tzu Chi operates in over 50 countries, delivering comprehensive humanitarian services rooted in Buddhist values (Yao, 2012).

### 3. Environmental Conservation and Buddhist Ethics

Buddhism's emphasis on interdependence extends to environmental stewardship. Many Buddhist communities actively engage in sustainable agriculture, conservation efforts, and climate advocacy. Notable examples include:

The Thai Forest Tradition, which promotes ecological preservation as a form of spiritual practice. Wat Pa Pong, a renowned forest monastery in Thailand, embodies the integration of Buddhist ethics with environmental conservation. Founded by Ajahn Chah in 1954 in Ubon Ratchathani Province, the monastery follows the Thai Forest Tradition, emphasizing simplicity, meditation, and deep respect for nature. Monks at Wat Pah Pong and its associated branch monasteries actively engage in environmental preservation by protecting forested areas around their monasteries, considering them sacred spaces for spiritual practice. The monastery's conservation efforts include tree ordination ceremonies, where trees are symbolically ordained as monks to prevent deforestation, a practice that has gained traction across Thailand. Wat Pah Pong also promotes sustainable living through mindful consumption, minimal ecological footprint, and community engagement in reforestation projects. These activities reflect the Buddhist principle of interdependence, reinforcing the idea that environmental well-being is crucial to human and spiritual development. The monastery's approach has inspired numerous forest conservation initiatives within Thailand and beyond. Another notable name within the Thai Forest Tradition is that of Sulak Sivaraksa. Sivaraksa, a prominent Thai intellectual, social activist, and founder of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB), has been a leading advocate for environmental activism as an extension of Buddhist compassion (Kongsombut et al., 2024). His work emphasizes the principle of sufficiency economy, a model inspired by Buddhist ethics that promotes sustainable living, local self-reliance, and mindful consumption. Sulak has been instrumental in grassroots environmental movements in Thailand, challenging destructive development projects, deforestation, and corporate exploitation of natural resources. Through INEB, he has mobilized Buddhist monks and laypeople to engage in ecological preservation, including reforestation initiatives, campaigns against dam constructions that displace indigenous communities, and educational programs on sustainable agriculture. He has also been a vocal critic of consumerism and globalization, arguing that these forces fuel environmental degradation and social inequality (Sulak, 1992).



Then we have His Holiness the 17th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, has been a leading advocate for climate responsibility, integrating Buddhist principles with environmental activism. As the head of the Karma Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism, he has emphasized the urgent need for ecological awareness within Buddhist communities. In 2009, he launched the Khoryug (meaning "environment" in Tibetan) initiative, a network of over 50 monasteries and nunneries across the Himalayas dedicated to environmental conservation. Under his guidance, Khoryug has implemented projects on reforestation, water conservation, organic farming, and waste management, particularly focusing on reducing plastic waste in monastic settings. The Karmapa has also organized multiple environmental conferences, bringing Buddhist leaders together to discuss climate change and sustainable practices. His book, *The Heart Is Noble: Changing the World from the Inside Out* (2013), outlines his vision for compassionate environmental stewardship, urging individuals and institutions to recognize the interdependence between humanity and nature. His advocacy extends beyond the Buddhist community, as he has spoken at international forums, emphasizing the moral responsibility of all religious traditions to protect the planet (Dorje et al., 2014).

#### **4. Buddhist Peace Movements and Conflict Resolution**

Buddhist leaders have played significant roles in promoting peace and reconciliation in conflict-affected regions. Monastic communities have initiated dialogue and humanitarian assistance to mitigate ethnic and religious tensions. Case in point is Nichiren Buddhism, particularly through the Soka Gakkai movement in Japan, has been a significant force in promoting peace, nuclear disarmament, and social justice as an expression of Buddhist compassion and global responsibility. Rooted in the teachings of Nichiren (1222–1282), Soka Gakkai International (SGI) emphasizes the concept of human revolution, where individual inner transformation leads to broader societal change. Under the leadership of Daisaku Ikeda, SGI has actively campaigned for nuclear disarmament, advocating for the abolition of nuclear weapons through initiatives such as the People's Decade for Nuclear Abolition and annual peace proposals submitted to the United Nations (Kinoshita, 2021). SGI played a key role in the establishment of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) by mobilizing public awareness and collaborating with international peace organizations (Ikeda, 2004).

Beyond disarmament, SGI also engages in humanitarian efforts, disaster relief, and environmental sustainability projects, viewing these activities as integral to Buddhist practice. The organization's Earth Charter Initiative aligns Buddhist ethics with ecological responsibility, promoting education on climate change and sustainability. SGI's Institute of Oriental Philosophy and the Toda Peace Institute further contribute to global dialogues on peacebuilding, interfaith cooperation, and social justice. The movement's commitment to peace is documented in Ikeda's extensive writings, such as *The Human Revolution* and *Choose Life*, which articulate a vision of engaged Buddhism dedicated to a harmonious and just world.

Another important example is The Dalai Lama and the broader Tibetan Buddhist movement have long advocated for nonviolence as the foundation for resolving conflicts, particularly in the context of Tibet's struggle for autonomy from China. Rooted in Mahayana Buddhist principles of compassion (*karuṇā*) and wisdom (*prajñā*), the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, has consistently promoted dialogue over confrontation, exemplifying the philosophy of *ahimsa* (nonviolence) as taught by the Buddha and reinforced by figures like Mahatma Gandhi. Since his exile in 1959, he has championed the "Middle Way Approach," seeking genuine autonomy for Tibet within the



framework of the People's Republic of China rather than full independence. His 1987 Five-Point Peace Plan, presented to the U.S. Congress, called for Tibet to become a demilitarized zone and emphasized environmental protection, human rights, and the preservation of Tibetan Buddhist culture (Lama, 2001).



The Dalai Lama's nonviolent struggle has garnered international support, earning him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989 for his unwavering commitment to peaceful resistance. Tibetan Buddhist communities in exile, particularly the Central Tibetan Administration in Dharamsala, India, have continued his advocacy through diplomatic efforts, education, and cultural preservation programs. Tibetan nonviolence also extends to grassroots activism, with organizations like the International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) and Students for a Free Tibet (SFT) using nonviolent resistance strategies, such as protests, petitions, and awareness campaigns, to highlight human rights abuses in Tibet. Furthermore, the Dalai Lama's engagement with neuroscientists and interfaith leaders through the Mind & Life Institute demonstrates his belief in compassion-based ethics as a means to foster global peace and nonviolent conflict resolution.

### **5. Rituals and Charitable Giving**

Buddhist festivals and rituals often incorporate acts of charity. The Vesak Festival, commemorating the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and passing, is marked by community service initiatives such as medical camps and food distribution. Similarly in the Kathina Ceremony, an annual event where laypeople offer robes and essential items to monks after the monastic vassa (rainy season retreat) demonstrates the shared responsibility of the community in sustaining the monastic order. This reflects monastic community engagement, where monasteries provide education, healthcare, and counseling services. The daily alms-giving ritual (pindapata) also reinforces the reciprocal relationship between monks and laypeople, promoting generosity (dāna) as a means of reducing suffering. Regular alms-giving and humanitarian efforts underscore the centrality of compassion in Buddhist practice. Further, charitable rituals such as the Kannon Compassion Practices in Japan and China reflect the ideals of the Bodhisattva path (Dykstra, 1976). Devotees of Avalokiteśvara (Kannon/Guan Yin) engage in acts of service like food distribution and disaster relief, much like modern Buddhist organizations such as the Tzu Chi Foundation, which extends these principles through humanitarian aid, healthcare, and education.

### **6. Compassion in Buddhist Art and Literature**

Buddhist culture expresses compassion through artistic and literary forms. Depictions of Avalokiteśvara (the Bodhisattva of Compassion) in temples and scriptures inspire devotees to cultivate kindness. Buddhist literature, theater, and iconography serve as moral and ethical reminders of the importance of karuṇā in daily life.

Buddhism provides a moral and ethical framework for addressing global challenges. Key doctrines such as the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, and the Bodhisattva ideal offer pathways to sustainable human development (Dykstra, 1976)

#### **The Four Noble Truths and Social Development**

1. Dukkha (Suffering): Acknowledges suffering in multiple forms—physical, psychological, and social, including issues like poverty and discrimination.
2. Samudaya (Cause of Suffering): Identifies attachment, ignorance, and systemic injustices as sources of suffering.



3. Nirodha (Cessation of Suffering): Advocates for the elimination of suffering through ethical transformation.
4. Magga (Path to Cessation): The Noble Eightfold Path provides a structured approach to personal and social well-being.

### **The Noble Eightfold Path and Sustainable Development**

- Right View & Right Intention: Encourage ethical policymaking and sustainable economic models.
- Right Speech & Right Action: Foster respectful dialogue and non-exploitative labor practices.
- Right Livelihood & Right Effort: Promote ethical professions and perseverance in humanitarian efforts.
- Right Mindfulness & Right Concentration: Advocate for mental well-being and mindful leadership in governance.

When applied to human development, the Noble Eightfold Path serves as a holistic approach to creating compassionate, equitable, and sustainable societies. The emphasis on right livelihood, right action, and right speech, in particular, underscores the importance of creating systems and structures that serve the collective good, promote justice, and address the root causes of inequality and social injustice. On the other hand, the Bodhisattva ideal emphasizes selflessness, altruism, and social responsibility. It calls for collective action to alleviate suffering, reduce inequalities, and promote well-being for all. Just as the Bodhisattva vows to act in the world with love and compassion, societies can embrace shared responsibility by promoting policies and initiatives that ensure equitable access to resources, education, healthcare, and social justice.

Buddhist compassion in action is a dynamic and transformative force shaping human development across Asia and beyond. By integrating ethical living, social responsibility, and humanitarian service, Buddhism offers a holistic model for addressing contemporary challenges. The principles of *karuṇā* and interconnectedness inspire individuals, communities, and institutions to work collectively towards a compassionate, just, and sustainable world.

### **Conclusions**

To sum up, one cannot miss out the extraordinary asset of Buddhism which emphasizes on the concept of compassion. The concept is not merely an idea but is profusely practiced. All Asian Buddhist countries delineate this concept in practice. In Theravada Buddhist countries this concept is much evident with the practice of daily alms giving to the monks and monasteries. The human behaviour and reciprocity for good action is therefore found very much in action. Humanity is thus beneficiary of such compassion. Whatever happens in Buddhist countries of Asia is reflected as a guideline for the other parts of the human world.

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