



Lessons and Learnings for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): A Study of Teachings and Metaphysics of the Bodhisatta Buddha

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Abstract

Background: This paper aims to analyze the issues of sustainable development and its goals from the Buddhist perspective.

Methods: Methodologically, it employs a systematic review process that explores the various themes of Buddhism, as outlined in the teachings of the Buddha, and applies these themes to the analysis of sustainable development.

Results: The major findings of the study include that the contested discourse of sustainable development can be discussed much better with Buddhist philosophy and hermeneutics. Materialistic development alone cannot be the sole indicator of development, and the materialistic interpretation of development has been in a profound crisis. In this context, the Buddhist perspective seems to be an alternative and more humanistic approach to development. There are two aspects in the teachings of the Buddha, or the Buddhist perspective: theoretical (*pariyatti*) and practical (*patipatti*). Both aspects are equally important as both have played significant roles from their origin to the modern era. However, materialistic development, even its fullest achievement, has not proven to be sufficient for the eradication of dukha (suffering and misery) at both the individual and collective levels of society.

Conclusion: Hence, this paper concludes that the practical aspects of the Buddha's Teachings can help alleviate such dukha and foster sukha, i.e., peace and harmony in society, which is the ultimate metaphysics of sustainable development.

Keywords: Buddhism, development, SDGs, sustainability, wellbeing



Introduction

This paper is based on the ontological position that the teachings of the Buddha can contribute to enhancing the idea of sustainability in development, i.e., sustainable development. The concept of sustainable development encompasses long-lasting or everlasting development, maintaining a harmonious relationship with society (social development), economy (economic development), and ecology (environmental protection) for future generations. This kind of sustainability could not be achieved without the core values, traditions, and practices of Buddhism. In Buddhist metaphysics and hermeneutics, sustainability must be understood in the context of impermanence (anicca), which means nothing can remain permanently unchanged. Thus, sustainability does not mean permanence; rather, it means sustaining the conditions for human well-being, meaning, compassion, and happiness across generations, while continually adapting to change and accommodating the concerns of all biotic and abiotic conditions. Here, the metaphysics of development questions the deeper assumptions about the continually evolving process of human well-being, progress, and the meaning of a good life beyond material growth. Buddhist teachings offer an alternative perspective by emphasizing impermanence, interdependence, compassion, moderation, and the reduction of suffering as foundations of long-lasting development. It creates a foundation of sustainable development. Buddhism is a science that perceives knowledge as inherent to scientific methods and hermeneutics. It conceives the concepts and approaches of Right View, Right Meditation, and Right Conduct ([Laumakis, 2023](#); [Siderits, 2017](#)). Beyond the spiritual interpretation of Buddhism, it has some material roots that are inclined to the daily life of people and day to day activities of society. Despite having huge investments in different sectors of development, the world today is still facing many problems, including violence, threats, inequality, discrimination, warfare, and dependency. This is why [Loy \(2014\)](#) reflects the rationale that Buddhism and the modern world need each other. The core tenet of the recent trend of development studies is to cater to a multiplicity of Buddhist perspectives on development in terms of its theories, practices, and policies. Sustainability, in this context, goes beyond the conventional three parameters (social, ecological, and economic) and moves to the ways of sustainability for inner peace and happiness in the world. Thus, the relationship between Buddhist metaphysics and development studies is the central analytical theme of this present study, offering a holistic perspective that transcends conventional development parameters. Development is a contested idea and a multidimensional discourse. Yet, there are various philosophical questions and empirical issues that have influenced most aspects of social, economic, political, and ecological dimensions of human society and beyond that too ([Geiser, 2014](#); [Sapkota, 2018](#)). The growth-led dimension and economic interpretation of development have become debated and insufficient in recent years to catch the global concerns of justice, peace, equity, and harmony. Even the slogan of the SDGs that have been set for the 2016-2030 agenda could not be justified for long-term development. In this context, the need for a new approach to development is urgent. Buddhism can serve as a powerful analytical tool for envisioning development from both material and non-material perspectives, offering a fresh



perspective on these pressing issues. In specific, the following research question is critical to answer from this paper:

What contribution can the philosophical concepts of Buddhism and the teachings of Bodhisatta Buddha make to the analysis of sustainable development, its goals, and future prospects?

Methods

There are different perspectives and themes for defining development and the Buddhist perspective is one of the popular and emerging worldviews among them. With this constructionist paradigm, the paper aims to analyze the key issues of development studies from the practical aspect of the Buddhist perspective. It follows a review-based approach using secondary sources of data along with the empirical, policy, theoretical, and critical review of selected scientific publications (i.e., journals, articles, theses, and books). The article adopts the PRISMA methodology, which begins with an initial consultation of seventy-three articles and scientific publications. After a thorough screening process, only fifty-two out of them were considered the most relevant and scientific readings in this study context. They were selected for in-depth review and synthesis. The study adopts a qualitative-thematic approach of analysis to explore the teachings of Bodhisatta Buddha and their relevance to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It therefore analyzes key Buddhist principles and teachings thematically to identify their applicability, insights, and potential contributions to discourse and practices of sustainable development.

The screening process also included the critical availability, accessibility, and relevance of the selected texts along with their scholarly quality. The researcher also considered religious and philosophical sensitivities in interpreting Buddhist teachings. Thematic coding and comparative synthesis of selected literature was carried out to identify the common elements, arguments and connections between Buddhist teachings and sustainable development. The interpretation did not make any assessment or judgment on the basis of the sources reviewed and the Buddhist text traditions, but on the basis of the evidence found in the literature selected for the study.

Literature Review

The Philosophical Background

Until the early 19th century, the word Buddhism was non-existent in any language, and scholars introduced the term in European languages as a designation of the religious regime whose focus was the image or memory of this figure known as Buddha, the Enlightened One. Buddhists described their faith earlier as dharma or dharma vinaya, i.e., law-rules. These came to be in the Sanskrit word Dharma, the doctrines of the Buddha. In Sri Lanka, they continue to be called the sasana, the teachings, and in China, the old name is fojiao (Buddha doctrine or teachings), now also used as a translation of the European name Buddhism. It is reported that the word Boudhism was added to the Oxford English Dictionary in 1801 (AD) and came out as Buddhism in 1816 ([Edward & Melton, 2008](#)).



In a very concise manner, [Dhammananda \(1993\)](#) has summed up that Buddhism is nothing but the Noble Truth. The issue of what Buddhism is has confused netizens, who have repeatedly asked whether Buddhism is a philosophy, a religion, or a way of life, or how it can be integrated. The simple truth is that Buddhism is a complex and expansive system that is non-theistic. It is a philosophy, a religion, and a lifestyle, yet at the same time it is more than those things. To Sayagyi, Buddhism is not a religion per se because it does not revolve around a deity like most other religions do. It is not a counting system but a comprehensive system of philosophy and morality, encompassing both physical and mental aspects. It aims at the eventual elimination of suffering and death ([Vipassana Research Institute-VRI, 1991a](#)).

[Nanissara \(1990\)](#) theorizes Buddhism as a comprehensive system approach to Dhamma. The Dhamma system consists of moral, philosophical, practical, and ethical components. Nevertheless, the Western concept of religion is not synonymous with the Eastern idea of Dhamma, which is well-articulated in Vedanta and Buddhist texts. Buddhism seeks to revitalize the science of religion in specific methodological approaches. Therefore, [Watts \(1999\)](#) recalls Buddhism as the religion of no-religion. It is not merely a religion or a faith system, nor is it a practice of worshipping a supernatural Supreme Being. Instead, Buddhism is a guiding path that leads disciples, through pure living and pure thinking, to attain Supreme Wisdom and deliverance from all defilements ([VRI, 1991b](#)). This wisdom can be gleaned from the teachings of the Bodhisattva and the life of the Buddha.

The life of Buddha is itself a science of the Buddha's teachings. They can be simply categorized into four traits: *Acchariya-abhuta Sutta (MN 123)*; *Māgandiya Sutta (MN 75)*; *Mahāsaccaka Sutta (MN 36)*; and *Ariyapariyesana Sutta (MN 26)*. The Tibetan tradition encompasses two aspects of the Buddha's teachings. The first is the actual practice of Dhamma, known in Pali as the Buddha's path, or patipatti, which involves the practice of Vipassana meditation. One can only gain the direct experience that leads to the ultimate destination of freedom from all suffering by practicing. The second significant area of Dhamma is pariyatti, which encompasses knowledge on the theoretical, intellectual plane. This is useful in encouraging one to engage in the real practice of meditation and to demystify queries that might come during their practice. There are three books about the teachings of the Buddha: Vinaya-pitaka, Sutta-pitaka, and Abhidhamma-pitaka ([Mahāthera, 2024; VRI, 1995a](#)).

The Vinaya-Pitaka is a collection of rules and discipline established to control the behavior of the followers of Buddha who are already initiated into the order as *bhikkhus* (monks) and *bhikkhunis* (nuns). Sutta-Pitaka is a complete book consisting of all discourses made in different situations by the Buddha. Some of the speeches of the leading disciples of the Buddha, such as Venerable Sariputta, Maha Moggallana, and Venerable Ananda, accompany some accounts in the books of the Sutta-Pitaka. The third great division of the Pitaka is called abhidhamma. It is simply a systematic organization of the tabulated and classified doctrines of the Buddha, and it formulates the quintessence of the Buddha's teachings. Abhidhamma means the higher doctrine or the special doctrine; it is unique and special in its path of analysis, its magnitude, and its sustenance of one's liberation ([Conze, 2014](#)).



Science of Sukha and Dukha

The science of sukha and dukha is not equivalent discourse of western conceptualization of pleasure and suffering. In Indian sub-continental philosophical context, Vedanta and Buddhist perspectives examine the nature, causes, and conditions of human happiness and suffering. While Vedanta emphasizes self-realization and liberation through knowledge of the true Self, Buddhism emphasizes impermanence, non-self, and the cessation of suffering through the transformation of desire and attachment. However, it is a never-ending debate about the methods and processes of achieving or ceasing such sukha and dukha in Vedanta and other Darśanas ([Sapkota, 2026](#)).

According to Patanjali, the ultimate aim of all dharma is moksha (liberation), which is attained through the practice of Yoga. It is the cessation of mental fluctuations, i.e. *cittavrttinirodhah*). According to Buddha, meditation aims to experience the cessation of the mind itself (*cittanirodha*). Patanjali speaks of three aspects of suffering in his Yogadarśana, viz. *parinama-duhkha* (suffering due to mutation), *tapa-duhkha* (suffering due to agony), and *samskara-duhkha* (suffering due to subliminal impressions). The Buddha also spoke of three states of suffering, viz. *dukkha-dukkhata*, *sankhara-dukkhata* and *viparinama-dukkhata*. The Buddha's *dukkha-dukkhata* and Patanjali's *tapa-duhkha* have the same connotation since the terms *duhkha* and *tapa* are synonymous in Sanskrit literature. Patanjali asserts that for the discriminant, there is nothing but suffering (*duhkha*) in this world. This forms the cardinal teaching of the Buddha. According to him, there is suffering everywhere, even in joy, because there is always the anxiety of losing it and the fear of what may happen when the pleasure has faded. As a matter of fact, according to the Buddha, whatever sensations one experiences, all are nothing but suffering; that is to say, not only is *dukkha-vedana* (unpleasant sensation) suffering, but *sukha-vedana* (pleasant sensation) and *adukkha/asukkhata-vedana* (neutral sensation) are also suffering, because of their impermanent nature.

In fact, according to the Buddha, whatever sensation we might feel, all of them are nothing but suffering; in other words, not only *dukkha-vedana* (bad or unpleasant feeling) is suffering/dukkha but *sukha-vedana* (good and pleasant feeling) and *adukkha/asukkhata-vedana* (neutral feeling) as well, due to the impermanent nature of everything. In this *Anicca* (Anitya) principle, Buddhism is explicit. It is the wisdom inherent in knowing that everything (*visaya* and *vastu*) is impermanent and conditioned- impermanent means it is in continual flux, coming into being (*bhava*) and passing away (*vibhava*). Impermanence or *Anicca* leads to the understanding of non self or *Anatta* which form the crux of the liberation path of Buddhism. Both the Buddha and Patanjali have the same expression to signify the aspects of pleasant feelings turning into 'suffering' as a result of change taking place, what Buddha calls '*vipainamadukkhata*' and Patanjali '*parinama-duhkha*' ([VRI, 1995a](#)).

Buddhism has awakened considerable interest in the West, and many scholars in Western society are sympathetic to Buddhism. There is less antagonism against Buddhism as compared to other emancipatory thoughts ([Batchelor, 2021](#)). Despite much early contact between Europe and Asia, Buddhism explored very slowly to the Western culture and academia until modern



times. As [Keown \(2013\)](#) notes, the Knowledge of Buddhism has spread to Europe and America through three main channels: the labor of Western scholars; the work of philosophers, intellectuals, writers, and artists; and the arrival of Asian immigrants to this region. Moreover, the UN missions for peace, reconciliation, and conflict management in different countries, and the appeals of the UN General Secretaries at different times have recognized the importance of Buddhism in the global context.

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956) claims in his book *The Introduction to The Buddha and His Dhamma* that the ‘four Aryan truths’—sorrow, the origin of sorrow, the cessation of sorrow, and the way to the cessation of sorrow—are not part of the original teaching of the Buddha ([Ambedkar, 2011](#)). This formula is contradictory to the root of Buddhism. If life is sorrow, death is sorrow, and rebirth is sorrow, then there is an end to everything. Eventually, the four Aryan Truths are a great stumbling block in the way of non-Buddhists accepting the gospel of Buddhism. Similarly, he asserts that ‘a terrible contradiction’ exists between the doctrines of karma and rebirth and the Buddha’s denial of the existence of the soul. However, Ambedkar’s movement towards Buddhism reached a climax in 1935 when Ambedkar announced, ‘Although I have been born a Hindu, I will not die a Hindu.’ It culminated in October 1956 in the city of Nagpur in central India when he and 400,000 followers took the ‘three refuges’ of traditional Buddhism and an additional 22 vows. This was a major turning point for Dalits and for the religious-cultural identity of India ([Ambedkar, 2011](#); [Omvedt, 2003](#)).

Max Weber (1864-1920), in his book *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*, conceptualizes Buddhism as an asocial, anti-political, and other-worldly religion ([Weber, 1916](#)). Such preoccupied assertions and mistaken beliefs about the original teachings of the Buddha are yet a threat to the authenticity and continuity of the Bodhisattva. However, [Dhammajoti \(2022\)](#) concludes that Buddhist teachings include the Origin of State, First Counsel of the Buddha, the nature of Political Authority, Sevenfold Conditions of Prosperity, Tenfold Rules of Governing, Cakkavatti Kings, Ballot systems, Voxpopuli, Root causes of Revolutions, and State policies directly pertaining to the political philosophy of Buddhism. He maintains that Buddhism is not anti-political, as Max Weber explains. Rather, the Weberian counterargument is groundless and unjustifiable, while Buddhism contains a favorable political philosophy for the modern world in the context of peace and harmony ([Dhammajoti, 2022](#)).

Result and Analysis

The Four Noble Truths and the Law of Dependent Origination

The Four Noble Truths are considered one of the fundamental doctrines of Buddhism. The Four Noble Truths are the ultimate realities about worldly things from which one can eventually be liberated or enlightened. This Bodhi gyan was revealed by Buddha in his first sermon, the *Dhamma-cakka-pavattana Sutta* (the discourse to set in motion the Wheel of Dhamma). The first three of the four Noble Truths are preached out as the teachings of the Buddha, and the fourth (the Eight-fold Noble Path, which is a sort of moral and philosophical code) is a tool to



the goal. There are: 1) Dukkha-sacca (the truth of suffering or miseries); 2) samudaya-sacca (the truth of the origin of suffering, i.e., the dukkha/ sukha); 3) nirodha-sacca (the truth of the extinction of suffering); 4) magga-sacca (the truth of the path leading to the extinction of suffering, i.e., nirvana). Each of the noble truths, i.e., saccas are subsequently inclusive and depend on each other in a cause-effect dynamics ([Rinpoche, 2018](#); [Thiengkamol, 2012](#)).

From a discourse perspective, these truths are also related to the metaphysics of all events in the world, not just the issue of emancipation from miseries. It is important to understand that development and underdevelopment are not isolated, but rather inextricably linked facets of the same phenomenon that can be produced and reproduced inherently. This interconnectedness adds a layer of complexity to Buddhist philosophy, enlightening us about the dialectic of *sukha* and *dukkha*. In this context, [Sapkota \(2022, p. 18\)](#) compares the discourse of development with the Four Noble Truths, suggesting that development represents *sukha* (well-being) and underdevelopment signifies *dukkha* (suffering), yet it is dignity and fulfillment that transcend both, which eventually defines the ultimate goal of society.

The Law of Dependent Origination

Buddhism as it is will not be complete without the mention of the law of *paticca samuppada* (the Law of Dependent Origination) and the law of *patthana* (the law of relations or cause and effect). In Buddhism, despite the absence of realization of the Four Noble Truths, ignorance (*avijja*) exists, and it is the factor that brings about the development of mental forces (*sankhara*), including control of the life continuum (*vinnana*) in all sentient beings ([Santina, 2024](#)). In almost the same way as in a new life, the life continuum is founded, and mind and matter (*nama and rupa*) automatically and correspondingly appear. These, further, are evolved into a vehicle or body with sense centres (*sadayatana*). These sense centers originate the contact (*phassa*); and contact of these sense centers with sense objects causes sense impressions (sensation-*vedana*) that have the impact of setting desire (*tanha*), being followed closely by attachment or clinging to desire (*upadana*). Birth, old age, sickness, death, worry, agony, sufferings, pains, to mention but a few, are caused by this attachment or clinging on to desire and thus are referred to as suffering. This way, the Buddha traced the cause of suffering to ignorance ([VRI, 1991b](#)). The Buddha said:

Ignorance is the origin of mental forces; mental forces, the origin of the life continuum; life continuum, the origin of mind and matter; mind and matter, the origin of sense centers; sense centers, the origin of contact; contact, the origin of impression (sensation); impression (sensation), the origin of desire; desire, the origin of attachment; attachment, the origin of becoming (existence); becoming (existence), the origin of birth; birth, the origin of old age, illness, death, anxiety, agony, pains, etc. (which all are suffering).

The chain of origination (and de-origination) of any *sankhara*, *visaya*, *vigyan*, *vidta/ avidya* is called the Law of Dependent Origination. It explains the science of existence and non-existence. The root cause for all these is *avijja*, or ignorance, i.e., ignorance of truth, and the *anattā*, i.e., ignorance of the non-self and impermanency. The metaphysics of this principle is that there is nothing that originates and ceases independently or without the root in this world.



The Buddha said, “The five aggregates, which are nothing but mind and matter, also are suffering”. The truth of suffering is completely known only when one realizes the truth by observing the mind and matter as they are (both within and without) and not as they seem to be or likely to be ([Spackman, 2012](#); [VRI, 2011](#)).

The Law of Dependent Origination, a universal law of cause and effect, teaches us that no permanent existence of cause or effect exists and that they reinforce each other. If the driving force is unwholesome (the cause), the vocal and physical action will be unwholesome (the consequence). If the seeds are unwholesome, then the fruits are bound to be unwholesome. In this context, we can argue that the seeds of underdevelopment and inequality will produce another type of underdevelopment and inequality. However, a positive and wholesome driving force, one that is rooted in justice and peace, can lead to transformative change. If the driving force of development and policy interventions is positive and wholesome, the results of the development are bound to be wholesome, prosperous, mindful, and sustainable. This emphasis on justice, equity, and peace gives us hope and inspiration for a better future, showing us the transformative power of positive driving forces.

Debates on Development and Sustainability

Indeed, development has been an attractive term to rulers and policymakers. It creates power and a regime. There is no agreement among developmental thinkers regarding a common definition of development. In a way, its metaphysics is mysterious and diverse ([Sapkota, 2023a](#)). Why some countries and their people are richer and achieve developmental milestones more quickly than others has remained a subject of much exploration, research, and debate. The dictionary meaning of development is the fruitful betterment, progressive transformation, and increase in the living standard and quality of life in all aspects. [Todaro and Smith \(2020\)](#) have explored the economic dimension of development, recognizing its plurality and multi-contextual implications. They perceive development as both a physical reality and a state of mind in which society has, through some combination of social, economic, and institutional processes, secured the means for obtaining a better life. Taking a humanistic approach, [Sen \(1999\)](#) perceives development as a means of enhancing individual entitlements, capabilities, rights, freedom, and confidence. The end part is happiness and well-being. The later publications of Amartya Sen (2005, 2006, 2011, 2015, 2020) have further emphasized a sustainable human development approach to development, which includes three fundamental components, i.e., education, health, and income for a decent living ([Miletzki & Broten, 2017](#)). Sustainable development has been emerged as a strategy, principle, and practice of development. It was first institutionalized at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. This landmark event marked the beginning of a global effort to achieve long-term development goals and outcomes while preserving natural systems, natural resource bases, and ecosystem services ([Johnson et al., 2023](#)). The concept of sustainable development was further solidified in 1987 when the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development published the report *Our Common Future*, commonly known as the Brundtland Report. This report offered the most widely cited definition of sustainable development as development that



meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (United Nations, 1987). It contains two key concepts: the concept of 'needs' and 'limitations', which are two unavoidable aspects of sustainability. The needs should be fulfilled, but the limitations are also a critical part of consideration. It then assures a balance between economic developments, environmental protection, and socio-cultural well-being.

The United Nations General Assembly adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, with a 15-year timeframe (2016-2030). These global goals have a main motto of 'Peace and prosperity for people and the planet. It offers 17 goals with specific targets and indicators to address the global challenges of poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, and promoting Peace, justice, and partnership in the world. The 17 SDGs address a broad spectrum of global priorities ([UNDP, 2025](#)). They include eradicating poverty and hunger; ensuring health, education, and gender equality; providing access to clean water, sanitation, and energy; promoting decent employment and resilient economic growth; encouraging innovation, infrastructure, and reduced inequality; building sustainable urban spaces and promoting responsible consumption; combating climate change; preserving marine and terrestrial ecosystems; and fostering peace, justice, and strong institutions. The final goal underscores the crucial role of strengthening global partnerships to collectively achieve these targets.

While the SDGs are comprehensive and grounded in the empirical foundation of sustainability, their achievement is not without challenges. Striking a balance between economic development, national security, and social well-being is a complex and critical task, especially as we have already surpassed more than half of the targeted period. The three-pillar conception of (social, economic, and environmental) sustainability requires a further exploration of the non-material dimension of development. The list of 17 goals does not include the lesson for inner Peace, harmony, dignity, non-violence, happiness, and critical transformation, commonly represented by three intersecting circles with overall sustainability at the center. Therefore, it appears to be ubiquitous ([Purvis et al., 2019](#)), highlighting some gaps and controversial issues in solving modern-day problems. In this context, [Clark and Harley \(2020\)](#) construct an integrated framework highlighting the importance of nature-society interactions in multiple contexts, including pathways toward sustainability and the development of capacities.

Observing Sustainable Development from the Perspective of Noble Truths

The four noble truths provide a philosophical framework that aligns with the principles of sustainable development. The First Truth, suffering (*dukkha*), is the current crisis across the world that includes environmental degradation, inequality, and overconsumption. The Second Truth is the origin of suffering (*tanha* or craving), corresponding to human needs for unreasoned expansion, materialism, and exploitation of nature, which ultimately lead to humanity's destruction. The Third Truth - cessation of suffering (*nirodha*) conveys the idea that a sustainable and harmonious life is possible by limiting greed and developing ecological balance. The Fourth Truth, the way, the path to the cessation (*maggā*), reminds us of the necessity to approach transformation, and this can be done in the spiritual exercise of the

Eightfold Path that can be understood as ethical consumption, right livelihood, mindful governance, and wisdom-based policymaking.

Box 1*Development and Four Noble Truths*

- (1) **Dukkha (truth of suffering)** → Environmental crisis, poverty, warfare, dependency and social injustice
- (2) **Samudaya (truth about the origin of suffering)** → Unsustainable economic growth, consumerism, anthropocentrism, exogenous development
- (3) **Nirodha (truth about the cessation of suffering)** → Possibility of ecological harmony, economic prosperity and social well-being.
- (4) **Magga (truth for the path to cessation)** → Ethical path toward sustainability through mindfulness, non-self, moderation, compassion, and systemic change.

Therefore, as illustrated in [Box 1](#), Buddhist values can be used to change exploitative development to a spiritually-based, regenerative, participatory, and more inclusive sustainability model. It inspires us to grow spiritually as we work towards a better future together.

Nature, Ecosystem and Development in Buddhism

The teachings of the Buddha are nature-friendly, as Buddhism is rooted in natural laws and scientific methods. It maintains that there are similar kinds of scientific laws for all living and non-living things in the world. According to [Ratnatunga \(2019\)](#), Buddhism is a philosophy that consists of three constitutive relations: the relation between human beings and the rest of nature (macro), among human beings (communal or social level), and the relation to the self (individual level). However, it is not merely a doctrine focused on human emancipation. Instead, it has its ethical and ontological considerations for the other societies, non-human, biotic, and abiotic components of nature. These considerations are put into practice through the role of ecosystem services, which create relationships that are deep and complexly intertemporal with each other. The relationships are impermanent, though Buddhism considers the inner connectivity of human beings and environmental concerns. They are interconnected with each other at both the micro and macro levels, inextricably linked, and interdependent.

The global problems of poverty, inequality, climate change, and insecurity cannot be solved by a materialistic approach to development. Nor can the three pillars of sustainable development, including social, ecological, and economic, alone solve the problems. Buddhism's emphasis on promoting equality and social peace, safeguarding the environment, and fostering economic growth is closely aligned with the principles of sustainable development. Bringing all these aspects of life into harmony, whether at the individual, group, or planetary levels, is the core of Buddhism. This essentially suggests that we cannot create wealth or enjoyment by destroying or disregarding other living things, including the environment, since we will ultimately pay a price for our actions ([Prakash, 2018](#)).



Discussion

Need of Paradigm Shifting

From a Buddhist perspective, the paradigm shift in sustainability arises from recognizing the interdependent nature of all phenomena (*pratītyasamutpāda*), where unsustainable practices are seen as rooted in ignorance (*avidyā*), craving (*trṣṇā*), and ego-centered development. The prevailing anthropocentric and materialistic models fail to address inner well-being and ecological harmony. Solutions lie in cultivating mindfulness, ethical livelihood (*samyag-ājīva*), and compassion-centered policies that prioritize collective welfare over individual gain. This shift entails a significant move from exploitative consumption to a path of moderation, interbeing, and spiritual ecology, emphasizing the need for balance and restraint in our consumption habits.

In recent years, scholars have proposed a collaborative paradigm shift in governance and development. For example, [Voulvoulis et al. \(2022\)](#) advocates for system thinking instead of social-economy-ecology triad for sustainable development, while [Morone \(2020\)](#) proposes a circular paradigm in place of a linear approach. The current deterministic approach is deemed insufficient as it conventionally focuses on development indices and sustainable development indicators within the framework of the SDGs. Indeed, spiritual, psychological and institutional dimensions are equally crucial in shaping holistic development. This collaborative shift in methodology involves all stakeholders, making it a collective effort. Governance, he asserts, should be viewed as a means rather than an end; the ultimate goal of both development and governance processes is the attainment of human well-being and collective fulfillment. In this context, [Sapkota \(2023b\)](#) highlights that the prevailing frameworks of modernization and development planning are deeply contested, often characterized by aid dependency and excessive bureaucratization. These frameworks urgently require a process of inner transformation and purification—what may be termed “inner engineering.” A re-evaluation of development practices, informed by the normative principles of Buddhist philosophy, is essential. Such a perspective would prioritize community well-being, Buddhist ecology and economy, right livelihood, and a conscious detachment from historically embedded biases.

Buddhist Ethics and Non-self-Leadership

Amidst the current ethical crisis, marked by a decline in moral values, norms, and behavior, a leadership crisis further compounds the situation. While leaders are abundant, the development of leadership has been the least prioritized agenda of political and social development. In this context, the introduction of concepts and skills related to Selfless leadership based on Buddhist ethics (BE) and the doctrine of the three characteristics (*Anitya*, *Pratitya-samutpāda*, and *Anātma*) ([Keown, 2016](#); [Roy, 2022](#)) emerges as a potential solution. Ethics, a fundamental asset of the *Pañcaśīla* (five precepts), can be drawn from the life of the Buddha and other Buddhist luminaries, serving as referential frameworks for instilling qualities of selfless leadership ([Fry & Vu, 2024](#)).



Box 2

Buddhist ethics and Non-self-Leadership

- (1) Leadership as a process and an institution. A system of theories, styles and qualities with Dhamma
- (2) Personal, inter-personal and social wellbeing for effective leadership and sustainable development
- (3) Role of the ethics in the development and exploration of wholesome and effective leadership
- (4) Leadership as an interdependent phenomenon
- (5) Proficiency in integrating view, meditation, conduct and communication skills as a hallmark of a self-less leader

From a Buddhist perspective, leadership is not just a role, but a transformative process of self-exploration. This perspective helps to dismantle the illusion of a self-centric and individualistic approach to leadership, revealing it as an ever-changing process that evolves through one's service to society. The Buddhist teaching of *Pratitya-samutpāda* guides us towards the idea of a "Self-less leader" not as an independent entity, but as an interdependent process of exploration that evolves in the course of selfless service and culminates in the multiple contexts of the socio-political world (outsider) and the individual *saṃskāra* (the insider). [Box 2](#) illustrates the relationship between Buddhist ethics and non-self-leadership, highlighting the potential for personal and societal transformation.

Happiness and Well-being in Context of SD

Development has become a discourse of intricate layers. It is a construct that intertwines both objective and subjective realities. The paradox of development lies in its refusal to be pigeonholed as purely materialistic or non-materialistic. The sustainable development discourse, in particular, views material development as a means and non-material development as an end. Since Adam Smith's influential writings, the concept of economic growth has been in vogue, yet concerns about the sustainability of this growth have persisted. The limitations of GDP as the sole indicator of societal advancement, while not the primary focus of most current discussions on the quest for suitable measures of 'development', are a crucial aspect to consider ([Peet & Hartwick, 2015](#); [Pieterse, 2010](#)). One of the main challenges in developing suitable indices stems from the measurement and comprehension of subjective social progress. In the current development discourse, happiness is emerging as a significant metric for assessing the sustainability of both the environment and humankind. It's important to note that material happiness does not necessarily ensure non-material well-being. This is evident in initiatives such as the Better Life Index (BLI), the World Happiness Summit, the World Happiness Report, and the Gross National Happiness Index (GNHI). However, many elements that significantly impact people's monetary, social, and spiritual lives remain unexplained. In this context, the economic indicators of development are found to be insufficient and premature.

As [Sangasumana \(2019\)](#) points out, Buddhist teachings on happiness, particularly the idea of compassion (Metta), can help fill this void. When gauging social development, it is advisable to consider four dimensions of happiness: physical, mental, social, and spiritual. This forms the contemporary insights to define the Buddhist perspective on happiness in relation to sustainable development and its applicability in a complex social world. In this context, [Sapkota \(2022\)](#) argues that well-being is not something inherently granted or conditioned; rather, it is a state that we can actively cultivate through the power of mindfulness and the eradication of various forms of suffering and evil. From a Buddhist standpoint, it is important to distinguish between a state of non-material well-being and material well-being, as both are increasingly dependent on and causal for each other (p. 17).

However, critics maintain that sustainable development is a conceptually abstract, pessimistic, and non-directional concept. It is more inclined to the 'materialistic solution' of world problems. Moreover, the Western philosophical approach does not represent the metaphysics of pleasure and happiness in sustainable development (*Sat-cit-ānanda*). The inner dimensions of *sukha*, *annada*, and *suraksha* should also be part of the sustainability discourse ([Sarao, 2019](#); [Sas, 2021](#); [Singh et al., 2017](#)). In this context, what lies beyond the SDGs and the 2030 era, and what are the world's affairs that could matter for the sustainability of development in the future, have become pertinent questions. The Buddhist worldview of development, with its enlightening perspective, is compatible with this critique. [Table 1](#) summarizes emergent issues of sustainable development from a Buddhist perspective.

Table 1

Issues in Contemporary Development Discourse and Buddhist Perspectives

Issues	Predominant concerns	Ontological questions
Foundation of Development	- Basic idea of development, underdevelopment, well-being (material and non-material) - Offering theoretical debates from macro to micro perspectives	- What is the spiritual dimension of Buddhism? - What is its metaphysics? - How can we theorize Buddhist economics and a new paradigm?
Sustainability study	- Fundamentals of sustainable development (SD) - Crisis in development (concept and context); alternative and post-colonial idea of development; - Local roots and global connections	- What beyond three pillars of SD (society, ecology and economy)? - Do the ideas of <i>sarbodaya</i> and <i>swarajya</i> still work? - What after the SDG era (post-2030)?
Ecology, environment and SD	Ecological sustainability and ecosystem services as an unavoidable part of SD	How does Buddhism perceive ecology and



Issues	Predominant concerns	Ontological questions
		environmental management?
Governance, planning and development	• Basic idea of governance; shared leadership and its importance in nature-friendly development	• Is there any way of not being governed and promoting non-self-leadership?
Sustaining peace and social transformation	• Basic concept on peace and conflict; non-violence and non-discrimination • Causes and effects of conflict, unhappiness, and greed (or peace, happiness and non-greed) • Sustainable livelihood and entrepreneurship development	• What would be the Buddhist idea of conflict management in a sustainable way? • How does Buddhism enhance sustainable livelihood (<i>samyak-ājibikā</i>)?
Research Methodology	• Basic idea and process of scientific research; views on reality • Critiques to conventional research approaches and paradigms	• What are the fundamentals of Buddhist methods of research, hermeneutics, axiology and epistemology?
Disaster risk reduction (DRR); risk management strategies and practices	• Introduction and types of disasters; causes and consequences of disasters; issue of climate change • Strategies of DRR, management and resiliency	• How do we apply a Buddhist perspective on DRR in the contemporary world suffering from climate change?

The above discussion informs that the issues surrounding sustainable development are diverse; to some extent, they are also overlapping and abstract. This complexity creates a risk of duplication and redundancy when designing and implementing development interventions in societies. These challenges often result in fragmented policies and diluted outcomes. However, the Buddhist perspective offers a cross-cutting framework that addresses these concerns by emphasizing inner transformation over external fixes. It promotes an ‘emic’ approach—rooted in local consciousness and indigenous values—rather than an ‘etic’, externally imposed outsider model, thereby fostering more holistic and context-sensitive pathways to sustainability. This contrast with current development practices invites a fresh perspective and new ideas.

Conclusion and Implications

Ontologically, development cannot exist in isolation. It is a concept that is constantly evolving in both theory and practice. The theoretical and practical aspects of the Buddha's teachings



have been equally important from ancient times to the modern era. Material well-being or material development alone is not sufficient for the development of people and nations, as it has not fully satisfied either. Therefore, the importance of non-material development and non-material well-being, or mental well-being, is steadily increasing in the present world. In this context, the practical aspect of the Buddha's original teaching needs to be reimaged in the context of sustainable development. The question of what will happen after 2030, or after the era of the SDGs (2016-2030), is a critical one. Therefore, it requires rethinking not only the empirical context of development but also its conceptual, theoretical, and methodological foundations. In this regard, the paper argues that Buddhist teachings offer a highly suitable framework for such a reorientation.

This study concludes that enriching sustainable development is impossible without the teachings of the Buddha, a Bodhisattva. Peace, harmony, cause-and-effect relationships, ecological aspects, and non-self-leadership are some of the critical measures to be considered from a Buddhist perspective. It requires a scientific methodological approach, allowing the discourses and practices of development to be questioned, tested, and then incorporated if deemed valid and pragmatic for the peace and prosperity of society. For this, the Buddhist pedagogical approach to teaching and learning can be an appropriate tool. De-learning and forgetting are two cosmic exercises for learning and remembering. The future of sustainable development is in our hands, and it's up to us to incorporate these teachings into our strategies.

This is what [Dōgen \(1985\)](#) has pointed:

"To study Buddhism is to study the self.

To study the self is to forget the self.

To forget the self is to become enlightened by all things."

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