11.1: The Sarvodaya Movement in Sri Lanka

Not long ago, the present Dalai Lama responded to the question, "What is a simple basic practice one should bear in mind if one finds it difficult to comprehend all the different levels of practice?" with the following answer: "I think in short that it's best, if you're able, to help others. If you're not able to do so, however, then at least do not harm others. This is the main practice."¹ Concern for appropriate action or virtuous conduct (*Sila/sila*) has always been an important feature of Buddhism, whatever the subtradition, but it has tended to be regarded as an essential but penultimate focus of concern. This concern is manifest in several ways: adherence to the precepts (e.g., noninjury to sentient beings) and cultivation of the virtues (e.g., compassion) in one's personal conduct; communication of Buddhist teachings; charitable activities; efforts to promote public welfare; living an alternative, distinctively Buddhist form of community life (whether in monastic or quasi-monastic communities); and efforts to bring about social change in accordance with Buddhist teaching. Only rarely has the way of right action become the primary focus of a subtradition. But examples where it has become a primary focus in both Theravada and Mahayana can be found.

One illustrative example is the Sarvodaya movement in Sri Lanka in the last half of the twentieth century. It represents a relatively new but nevertheless very Buddhist kind of social activism that can be found in other places in Southeast Asia as well as other parts of the world. The following account by Ken Jones² describes this broader movement of Buddhist social activism as "a transcendental radicalism":

*Transcendental Radicalism*

In the first place, this radicalism is *transcendental* in that radical social change is necessarily and explicitly based on personal development within a spiritual context, that is, through mindfulness, meditation, and retreat, but also through trying to make a work of art of personal and group relations and following a [distinctively Buddhist] lifestyle [which Jones outlines in a previous chapter] . . . . Conventional political radicalism is *transcended* in that radical personal change is also included as an essential part of the process of fundamental social change. For most people and in the short term
this development may in spiritual terms be quite modest: just becoming a little more human. But this is nonetheless significant, as is also the overarching spiritual perspective within which it takes place. This engaged spirituality is concerned with creating at the same time social conditions which will both relieve affliction and also support and foster personal growth.

In the second place, transcendental radicalism achieves social change through grass-roots initiatives of individuals and groups working in a spirit of community self-help and self-reliance. This reflects the tradition of self-reliance in Buddhist practice . . . . Emphasis is upon the development of networks of such groups and communities and the avoidance of hierarchical elites. Those who do the thinking also implement the decisions and those who implement the decisions also do the spade-work and take responsibility for it.

In the third place it follows that there is much emphasis on many different kinds of active learning, particularly from practical experience, and in a group, and through open dialogue, both for personal development and community and social development.

In the fourth place, transcendental radicalism is marked by its use of positive and active nonviolent strategies, which recognize the common humanity of the adversary and his dignity and autonomy. Change can only come through creative interaction (both inside and outside the movement) and the avoidance of negative forms of coercion even if they stop short of physical violence. . . . In particular, to appropriate the Buddhadharma to fortify one's own racial or national identity is grievously to pervert the Buddhadharma.

Fifthly, this is a conservative radicalism which seeks to foster all that is best intraditional culture and practice, and particularly the sense of community, regional and ethnic identity. Change has to be authentic and organic in character, from the roots, rather than imposed, mechanistic and manipulative. The old way of doing things, or some adaptation or evolution of it, may still be the best way. There is a particular concern to pioneer a Third Way of social and cultural development alternative to either Western capitalist-style "development" or communist-style socialism.

Sixthly, transcendental radicalism is pluralist, nonsectarian, fraternal and openminded in its relations with other belief systems, whether secular or religious, which share the same broad human values and concerns.

Seventhly, this engaged spirituality thinks globally as well as acting locally, and is particularly concerned with communication and co-operation between people of the First and Third Worlds.

Grass-Roots Activism in Sri Lanka

Sarvodaya, which means "the awakening and welfare of all," refers to spiritually inspired, rural self-development movements in India and Sri Lanka. The Sarvodaya movement of post-colonial India attempted unsuccessfully to implement the Gandhian ideal of a network of autonomous village commonwealths, and Gandhi's heir, Jayaprakash Narayan followed his example of mass civil disobedience when the Congress government frustrated that ideal. By contrast the Sri Lanka movement evolved in the Asokan tradition of a just relationship between village communities on the one hand and on the other a State which was perceived to be comparatively benevolent.

Sarvodaya began in Sri Lanka in 1958, when a young teacher, A. Y. Ariyaratne, encouraged his students to organize a fortnight "holiday work camp" in a destitute village. The students worked closely with the villagers and were concerned to learn what they themselves perceived as their needs and problems. Other schools and colleges followed this example,
and a village self-help movement emerged, outside the official rural development programme. During the 1970s training centres for community co-ordinators and specialists were established with help from overseas aid agencies. These schemes included a programme for the systematic training and involvement of Buddhist monks, who traditionally are highly influential in village life. Over two and a half million people, living in 7000 of Sri Lanka's 23,000 village communities are now involved in Sarvodaya, aided by some 2000 monks. The Village Awakening Councils enjoy programme and budget autonomy, but receive much specialist support from area and regional centres backed by extensive training programmes. Projects include roads, irrigation works, preschool facilities, community kitchens, retail co-operatives and the promotion of village handicrafts (though impact on agriculture appears to have been disappointing). Joanna Macy describes the typical shramadana or voluntary co-operative work project as being "like a combination of road gang, town meeting, vaudeville show and revival service-and these many facets build people's trust and enjoyment of each other."

Ariyaratne, now the movement's President, emphasizes that "The chief objective of Sarvodaya is personality awakening." The root problem of poverty is seen as being a sense of personal and collective powerlessness. And "awakening" is to take place not in isolation but through social, economic and political interaction. Personal awakening is seen as being interdependent with the awakening of one's local community, and both play a part in the awakening of one's nation and the whole world.

The spiritual precondition for all-round social development is kept in the forefront through Sarvodaya's creative interpretation of traditional Buddhist teachings in forms which can be understood and experienced by people collectively and in social terms. Thus, the shared suffering of a community, the poverty, disease, exploitation, conflict and stagnation, is explored together by the members as is also the suffering experienced by each one of them. But, crucially, this suffering is shown to have its origins in individual egocentricity, distrust, greed and competitiveness, which demoralizes and divides the community and wastes its potential. In place of the corrupted traditional meaning of kamma [Pali for the Sanskrit karma] as "fate," Ariyaratne emphasizes the original Buddhist teaching. "It is one's own doing that reacts on one's own self, so it is possible to divert the course of our lives.... [Jones's interpolation:] Once we understand that,] inactivity or lethargy suddenly transforms into activity leading to social and economic development." Similarity, each of the practices comprising the traditional Buddhist Eightfold Path is amplified socially. For example, Macy quotes a Sarvodaya trainer:

*Right Mindfulness*-that means stay open and alert to the needs of the village. . . . Look to see what is needed-latrines, water, road. . . . Try to enter the minds of the people, to listen behind their words. Practise mindfulness in the shramadana camp: is the food enough? are people getting wet? are the tools in order? is anyone being exploited?*

The traditional Buddhist virtues and precepts provide guidelines for joint endeavor and a significant vocabulary in the open discussions which are the lifeblood of the movement. Thus *dana* had come to be identified with monastic almsgiving, but Sarvodaya extends it back to its original wider meaning of sharing time, skills, goods and energy with one's community and demonstrates the liberating power of sincere and spontaneous generosity to dissolve barriers between individuals and groups. Similarly, the meaning of the "Four Sublime Abodes" has been extended socially without, however, losing their original spirit. So, *metta* (lovingkindness) refers also to the active concern for others and refraining from any kind of coercion. *Karuna* (compassion) refers to active and selfless giving of energy in the service of others. *Mudita* (rejoicing in others' good fortune) refers to the feeling of well-being experienced when one has


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been able to make a tangible contribution to one's community. *Upekkha* (equanimity) refers to independence from the need to achieve results and obtain recognition. It is the Buddhist remedy against burn-out of campaigning energies. Macy quotes a District Co-ordinator: "*Upekkha* is dynamite. It is surprising the energy that is released when you stop being so attached.... You discover how much you can accomplish when nothing is expected in return."^8

All these inspirational guidelines are presented in symbols, slogans, posters, murals, songs and stories, not as catechisms and commandments but as pointers and as tools of analysis. Above all, they are made fully meaningful through the practice of meditation, which is incorporated into Sarvodaya meetings and training sessions.

Sarvodaya aims at an economy of modest sufficiency, employing appropriate low and middle technology, with equitable distribution of wealth and concern for the quality of the environment. Local and national cultural identities and diversity are respected and nurtured, and it does in fact seem that the movement makes its strongest impact in the more traditional kinds of community.

The local knowledge and influence of the sangha [the monastic community] and the respect in which it is held at all levels of society enable the monks to make an extensive and significant contribution to Sarvodaya. Of the fifty-one members of the movement's executive committee no fewer than fifteen are monks. Macy writes that:

*The relationship between Sarvodaya and the Sangha is a symbiotic one, in that each benefits the other. As the monks serve as extension agents for the Movement's development program so do the Movement's ideology and expectations serve to revitalize their Order and their sense of vocation, restoring the wider social responsibilities they carried in precolonial days. This effect on the Sangha is not incidental or just a "spin-off," but an acknowledged goal of Sarvodaya.*^9

The Buddhist tradition of religious pluralism ... is also present in Sarvodaya. Ariyaratne claims that “the Sarvodaya Movement, while originally inspired by the Buddhist tradition, is active throughout our multi-ethnic society, working with Hindu, Muslim and Christian communities and involving scores of thousands of Hindu, Muslim and Christian co-workers. Our message of awakening transcends any effort to categorize it as the teaching of a particular creed."^10

As to Sarvodaya's relations with the State, Ariyaratne claims that "when some aspects of the established order conform with the righteous principles of the Movement, the Movement co-operates with those aspects. When they become unrighteous, in those areas the Movement does not co-operate and may even extend non-violent non-co-operation [though so far it has never done so-Jones's interpolation]). In be- tween these two extremes there is a vast area ... in which establishments like the government and the Sarvodaya Movement can co-operate."^11 In fact, since there is virtually a national consensus about the desirability of rural self-help schemes Sarvodaya has been able to operate over politically neutral ground. Whilst co-operating with relevant government policies and accommodating to the national and local power structure, the Sarvodaya Leadership's ambivalent and non-committal pragmatism has, arguably, so far enabled it to avoid compromising the movement's integrity.

Jones goes on from this point to describe in detail how since the 1970s Sarvodaya's growth in size and complexity and its relations with state economic policies have subjected it to new pressures that have raised controversial but by no means insurmountable questions about its character and future.

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