

# Thoughts on education for sustainable development: toward a life of value-creation

**Daisaku Ikeda** reflects from a Buddhist perspective on the development and educational challenges facing the world at the beginning of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development.

The year 2005 will mark the start of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. The Decade offers an opportunity to make real progress toward putting human society on the path to sustainability – an opportunity that we simply cannot afford to allow to pass unfulfilled.

The challenges facing us are clear and inescapable. More than one fourth of humankind lives in conditions of chronic poverty; famine, military conflict, human rights abuses, environmental degradation and climate change all threaten human dignity – indeed, survival. The interlocking nature of these threats is becoming ever more apparent. To quote a recent report released by the United Nations Environmental Programme: ‘experts predict that climate change will increase the severity of floods and droughts, which may lead to mass migration, undercut state capacities, and exacerbate widespread poverty. Environmental stresses, and the social phenomena they engender, have both direct and indirect ties to the global community’s greatest challenges: poverty, terrorism, globalization, poor governance, and inequality’ (UNEP, 2004). Humanity is already experiencing the impact of our present unsustainable modes of development. We must work now to put our planet on the path to sustainability – before the interlinkages between ecological degradation, poverty and social instability become manifest in truly disastrous form.

## The educational challenge

Sustainable development has been defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It thus concerns a wide range of issues and UNESCO has drafted an International Implementation Scheme (<http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php>) establishing the Decade’s relationship with education for peace, environment, human rights and development. This document describes the vision of the Decade as ‘a world where everyone has the opportunity to benefit from education and learn the values, behaviour and lifestyles required for a sustainable future and for positive societal transformation.’ breadth of this vision is encouraging because to meet this challenge education for sustainable development must find a

central place across the full spectrum of educational endeavours. Because it is such a comprehensive concept, sustainable development can provide the links across otherwise unconnected bodies of knowledge, opening up exciting new possibilities for multidisciplinary collaboration and cross-fertilization. But it is especially vital that we focus on children and young people, and on the primary and secondary levels of education. At the same time, education for sustainable development must actively engage traditional bodies of knowledge and nonformal sites of learning – in the family, the factory and the local community.

To achieve sustainability, we will have to draw from the richest veins of wisdom from humanity’s diverse past and present, enlisting these for the sake of the future we all must

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share. This is the particular strength of the Earth Charter (<http://www.earthcharter.org>), a statement of shared values and principles refined and formulated through a process of sustained dialogue involving representatives of the world’s

cultural and spiritual traditions. The Charter’s Preamble gives succinct expression to the full scope of the challenge: ‘We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.’

Most essentially, therefore, education for sustainable development is not about gaining mastery of a body of knowledge or a set of skills. It is about fostering an appreciation of interconnection that is both dynamic and intimate. It is, in this sense, not something that can be taught; it can only be learned. Ultimately, it is a matter of learning and growing into a new way of being.

For more than thirty years, seeking answers to the crisis facing humanity, I have pursued the path of dialogue, meeting with people from many different cultural, religious and intellectual traditions. If I were to attempt to summarize the common thread running through these discussions with individuals outstanding for both their insights and their heartfelt concern for the future, it would be this: If we are to survive there must be a profound change within human beings themselves: only a fundamental reorientation in the

inner life of humanity will enable us to meet the daunting challenges that face us.

In a talk given at Columbia University some years ago, I mentioned three attributes for global citizenship. These are:

- The **wisdom** to perceive the interconnectedness of all life and living.
- The **courage** not to fear or deny difference; but to respect and strive to understand people of different cultures, and to grow from encounters with them.
- The **compassion** to maintain an imaginative empathy that reaches beyond one's immediate surroundings and extends to those suffering in distant places.

The open-ended process of developing and strengthening these qualities, making them the functional attributes of daily life, is what I refer to as 'human revolution'. I believe that this kind of inner transformation is at the heart of education for sustainable development.

### **Buddhist perspectives**

Sustainability can best be understood in terms of relationships. The first is our relationship to ourselves, the inner dialogue from which ethical understandings and actions grow. The next is our relationship to other humans, in which I would include the entire spectrum of social and even political relations. Finally there is the relationship of humans, individually and collectively, to the totality of nature. Relatedness is at the heart of the Buddhist perspective on life and, based on this, I would like to share some ideas that I hope might contribute to the enriching our shared efforts toward sustainability.

There is a simple yet telling parable in Buddhism about the destructive nature of uncontrolled desire. The Buddha is said to have addressed one of his disciples, who he perceived to be secretly in the thrall of worldly desires, in the following manner. Suppose there is a forest near a village, and in that forest there is a tree laden with ripe fruit. Suppose that a man, desiring all the fruit, should climb the tree, eating the fruit at will and filling his satchel with them. Suppose that another man should come along, also desiring the same fruit. Unable to climb the tree, he takes an axe and fells the tree. The first man, already in the tree, could be injured or killed. The second man could end up causing the death of another. And of course the felled tree will never produce fruit again.

From the Buddhist perspective, our most pressing task is to understand the inner forces within the human heart that drive people to engage in the ultimately self-destructive act of disrupting and undermining harmony with the natural environment and other people. Buddhism regards the inability to recognize the reality of interconnection as 'fundamental darkness' or ignorance. This means ignorance of the web of interdependence that supports our existence in

the world. It is the inability or refusal to perceive the chains of cause and effect by which our actions influence our surroundings – in ways that ultimately return to us and impact our own lives. It is the cold brutality and folly that imagines that the misery of others can be the basis for our own happiness. This attitude is sadly reflected in patterns of energy and resource consumption that are undermining the very life-systems of the planet on which we live.

It is thus vital that we reawaken to the reality of our interconnection and interdependence – both with each other and with what the Earth Charter calls the 'greater community of life'. Awareness of interconnection must take concrete form in efforts to extend and build solidarity. We must each strive to build solidarity and concern for all those with whom we share this brief moment in the history of our planet. We must learn to imagine the world after we are gone and to act today with responsibility toward the generations who will follow us. We must try to develop a concrete sense of empathetic connection with all the forms of life on Earth and with Earth itself. And we must never surrender to the forces of hatred and division raging in the world – and the poisoned sense of futility and powerlessness they implant.

### **Learn, reflect, empower**

Within the great, interconnected web of being, each person has a unique purpose to fulfil, a contribution only they can make. Even if people are engaged in problematic behaviour, we should never give in to the temptation to regard people as a problem. We should instead learn to regard each individual

as a resource of truly limitless potential, remembering that the wisdom and insight to resolve humanity's most pressing challenges already exists as a hidden, untapped possibility in the hearts of people alive today – and most especially in the hearts

and minds of the young. To be effective, education for sustainability must be rooted in a deep faith in humanity – the determination to awaken and empower human agency. It was with this in mind that I referred, in a previous proposal, to three interrelated processes which ensure that education for sustainable development moves people to action:

- To **learn** and deepen awareness of environmental issues and realities.
- To **reflect** on our modes of living, renewing these toward sustainability.
- To **empower** people to take concrete action.

Among our contemporaries, Dr. Wangari Maathai, recipient of the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize and founder of the Green Belt movement which has enabled Kenyan women to plant some 30 million trees, is an eloquent advocate of empowerment. 'It is possible to mobilize ordinary people to change their lives... When I watch those women, they do not have education, some of them are barefoot, they don't have much

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in their lives. But then you see that they have actually done much more than some people who have more wealth, who have shoes, who have cars, who have a lot of education. ... When we take action at the local level we are empowered.' (Earth Council *et al*, 2003)

The founder of the Soka Gakkai, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, was an educator whose first work, *A Geography of Human Life*, written in 1903, offers a detailed exploration of the interrelationship between humanity and our natural environment. In this work, he stressed the diversity of ways in which humans can relate to natural phenomena. The same mountain, for example, can be perceived or appreciated on multiple levels. We may take a utilitarian view of it, for example, estimating the agricultural or economic possibilities it presents, or we may find in it aesthetic inspiration for artistic creation. It may awaken emotional associations such as a nostalgic yearning for home. We may also encounter a mountain from what Makiguchi called a public perspective, concerning ourselves with its value to the entire community and to future generations. A mountain may even inspire a sense of spiritual awakening or religious communion. Makiguchi did not accord absolute priority to any one of these different ways of interacting with nature. A century after Makiguchi wrote this pioneering book, it seems clear that harmonizing the plurality of our ways of relating to the world is one key to sustainability.

Makiguchi also describes, at the start of this book, his awareness of how the objects in his study, the various accoutrements of daily life, were in fact results of the labours of people in other lands. In his work, we can feel the common pulse and hear the shared breathing of self and other, of the unseen people near and far whose lives are linked to ours in relationships of mutual support. His efforts as an educator were focused on enabling children to develop a concrete appreciation of the relationships that connect us to each other, to the natural environment and to the world. He was fostering an ethic of coexistence as he encouraged children to view local realities in their broader context (Makiguchi 2002).

Makiguchi noted the fact that while humans cannot create matter, they can create value. He saw the development of wisdom as the key to enhancing children's ability to create value – to make the world a healthier, more beautiful, better place. I think his insight – that our capacity to create value is not intrinsically constrained by the physical resources we have available to us – points to a core aspect of sustainability: how do we develop the wisdom to do more with less? How do we create limitless value from a finite natural resource base so that all people – now and in the future – may enjoy lives of dignity, comfort and fulfilment?

## Directing desire

Key to this challenge will be our ability to confront the nature of human desire. For many people, Buddhism is associated with the denial of desires; it has an ascetic, meditative image that may suggest withdrawal from, or transcendence of, the realm of worldly affairs. I do not believe that this, however, is the true, original spirit of the Buddha who himself was fully engaged in the issues and conflicts of his time. The tradition of Buddhism with which I am associated stresses the control and direction of desires toward the creation of value and human happiness – not their eradication. What matters is whether we control our desires or are controlled by them, whether, in the words of one Sutra, we are the masters of our minds or our minds are our masters. A life in the sway of desire is symbolized by 'hungry spirits' whose frenzied efforts to consume produce no sense of satiety and offer a lesson highly pertinent to our world today.

More crucially, Buddhism teaches that desires can be transformed. The thirst for justice is a desire, so is the desire to free the world from needless suffering. The qualities of courage, wisdom and compassion which I mentioned earlier can act to unleash these most elevated forms of desire, encouraging reflection, action and transformation. The success of the Decade will depend on whether it can touch people's lives at this deepest level. Efforts for the future that come straight from the heart have the power to change the world.

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