

The Earth Charter for Sustainable Community Development from a Buddhist Virtues' Perspective

*Colin L. Soskolne, PhD
University of Alberta*

*Mirian Vilela
Earth Charter International Secretariat, Costa Rica*

*Betty McDermott
University for Peace, Costa Rica*

Introduction

Buddhist influence in the creation of the Earth Charter is enshrined in what is a brief document that embodies the values and ethical principles necessary for the sustainability of life on Earth. The document is designed to save us from ourselves. It is a soft-law instrument that celebrated its 10th anniversary globally in 2010. The Earth Charter is accessible in about 50 languages, including Thai, at the following link: www.earthcharterinaction.org/content/pages/Read-the-Charter.html.

A brief history of how the Earth Charter came about can be found here: <http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/content/pages/History.html>.

Through the Earth Charter, a return to the true meaning of the economic well-being of local communities everywhere is the aim by enhancing diversity and the sustainability of life on Earth. Other scholars have shown that the meaning of the word “economy” has been usurped, away from its origins when economy meant ensuring the “well-being of the household and local community”, to a globalized notion that puts the economy above all else.

The Earth Charter reveals not only connections among all aspects of life, but also inter-dependencies among universal human rights, respect for diversity, economic justice, democracy, and a culture of peace. Happiness as a Buddhist concept is the goal in community development, for both present and future generations.

The Earth Charter as Part of Buddhist Studies:

From “Buddhist Perspectives on the Earth Charter” published by the Boston Research Center for the 21st Century in 1997, various contributions addressing specific Buddhist traditions are included. An overview of the Earth Charter’s development is provided by Steven Rockefeller who is steeped in Buddhist teaching and was instrumental in the formulation of the Earth Charter.

In providing Buddhist perspectives on the Earth Charter, the first paper by David Chappell calls attention to the need to focus not only on individual actions, but also on collective actions. The second paper by Susan Darlington points to ecological conservation being addressed in the context of a growing number of Thai ecology monks. The next paper by Rita Gross encourages movement from wanting more to seeking greater contentment from less. The need to focus on world peace is addressed from a Nichiren tradition in the next paper by Yoichi Kawanda.

Stephanie Kaza focuses on a Zen perspective addressing the karma of violence, poverty, and suffering; the need to engage the structural agents that harm many members of the web of life is identified through Buddhist teachings, noting that the Earth Charter is

a call for karmic responsibility, for generating awareness around the consequences of individual and corporate actions. The paper calls for an awakening toward enlightenment. The paper by Sallie King views the Earth Charter as incorporating Buddhist values, including the need to protect the weak, consistent with the Buddhist principle of compassion. Finally, the paper by Donald Swearer recognizes our mutual interdependence through the Earth Charter as a set of responsibilities as opposed to a set of rights.

Virtues and Virtue Ethics in the Professions:

A virtue is a trait or quality deemed to be morally excellent and thus is valued as a foundation of principle and good moral being. Personal virtues are characteristics valued as promoting individual and collective well-being. The opposite of “virtue” is “vice”.

In Buddhist teachings, virtues that are cited include: *Generosity, Morality, Renunciation, Transcendental Wisdom, Diligence, Forbearance, Honesty, Determination, Loving-Kindness, and Serenity*. Other virtues associated with Buddhist traditions include: *Compassion, Enlightenment, Right understanding, Truth, Responsibility, Simplicity, Non-violence, Preventing and Healing Suffering, Harmony, Co-operation*. More specifically, Buddhist practice as outlined in the **Noble Eightfold Path** can be regarded as a progressive list of virtues:

Right View	Realizing the Four Noble Truths (samyag-dṛṣṭi, sammā-diṭṭhi).
Right Intention	Commitment to mental and ethical growth in moderation (samyak-saṅkalpa, sammā-saṅkappa).
Right Speech	One speaks in a non hurtful, not exaggerated, truthful way (samyag-vāc, sammā-vācā).
Right Action	Wholesome action, avoiding action that would do harm (samyak-karmānta, sammā-kammanta)
Right Livelihood	One’s job does not harm in any way oneself or others; directly or indirectly (samyag-ājīva, sammā-ājīva).
Right Effort	One makes an effort to improve (samyag-vyāyāma, sammā-vāyāma).
Right Mindfulness	Mental ability to see things for what they are with clear consciousness (samyak-smṛti, sammā-sati).
Right Concentration	Wholesome one-pointedness of mind (samyak-samādhi, sammā-samādhi).

Buddhism’s four **brahmavihara** ("Divine States") can be more properly regarded as virtues in the European sense. They are:

Metta, Maitri:	loving-kindness towards all; the hope that a person will be well; loving kindness is "the wish that all sentient beings, without any exception, be happy.
Karuṇā:	compassion; the hope that a person’s sufferings will diminish; compassion is the "wish for all sentient beings to be free from suffering.
Mudita:	altruistic joy in the accomplishments of a person, oneself or other; sympathetic joy – "the wholesome attitude of rejoicing in the happiness and virtues of all sentient beings.
Upekkha, Upeksha:	equanimity, or learning to accept both loss and gain, praise and blame, success and failure with detachment, equally, for oneself and for others. Equanimity means "not to distinguish between friend, enemy or stranger, but to regard every sentient being as equal. It is a clear-minded tranquil state of mind – not being overpowered by delusions, mental dullness or agitation.

Among the many ethical theories that form the tool kit for moral philosophers (including, Normative, Utilitarian, Deontological, Egalitarian, Relational, Libertarian) is

that of Virtue Ethics. Virtues do not replace ethical rules in general nor in the professions in particular. Rather, as discussed among epidemiologists, an account of professional ethics is more complete if virtuous traits of character are identified, such as:

Humility	Respect the input and opinions of others / Self-effacement
Fidelity	Honor one's commitments / Promote trust
Justice	Act fairly
Patience	Take time to hear others' viewpoints
Industry	Do your level best / Excel
Veracity	Tell the truth / Be honest
Compassion	Empathize
Integrity	Demonstrate good moral character
Serve	Protect the most vulnerable / Serve the public interest
Prudence	Err on the side of caution / Demonstrate good judgment

These various frameworks of virtues are implicit in the Earth Charter which is described below. There is an obvious synergy with the virtues named above.

The Earth Charter:

The Earth Charter starts with a preamble, provides some context, and then it articulates its four major principles: Respect and care for the community of life – Ecological integrity – Social and economic justice – Democracy, non-violence, and peace (see the Appendix for the principles).

None of these four major classes of principles is in conflict/tension with any of the virtues named above. Quite the contrary in fact – they dovetail almost perfectly, as we will see below.

After providing the above principles along with their sub-principles, the document concludes with an inspirational mapping of the way forward. Of note is the statement of Universal Responsibility, where a Buddhist influence is palpable:

Universal Responsibility:

To realize these aspirations, we must decide to live with a sense of universal responsibility, identifying ourselves with the whole Earth community as well as our local communities. We are at once citizens of different nations and of one world in which the local and global are linked. Everyone shares responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world. The spirit of human solidarity and kinship with all life is strengthened when we live with reverence for the mystery of being, gratitude for the gift of life, and humility regarding the human place in nature. (...)

Evident Parallels between Earth Charter Principles and Buddhist Virtues:

The Earth Charter has been developed with four major categories of principles. This structure was designed to make the adoption and implementation of each of the principles as practical as possible. Within each of the four major principles, there are four sub-principles that help to identify areas of application for their implementation.

The Earth Charter major principles strongly resonate with virtues embraced by Buddhism. The parallels are striking and instantly recognizable:

Earth Charter Principles	Virtues Embraced By Buddhism
I. Respect and Care for the Community of Life	Ties in with Morality, Compassion, Generosity, Non-violence, Harmony, Co-operation
II. Ecological Integrity	Ties in with Diligence, Renunciation, Responsibility, Simplicity, Harmony
III. Social and Economic Justice	Ties in with Generosity, Morality, Loving-Kindness, Compassion, Right Understanding, Harmony, Co-operation
IV. Democracy, Nonviolence, and Peace	Ties in with Transcendental Wisdom, Forbearance, Honesty, Truth, Non-violence

Soka Gakkai International (SGI):

Soka Gakkai International (SGI) is a Buddhist group that has been very active with the Earth Charter for years. Indeed, 10 years ago they prepared a document contained in the ECI’s virtual library and in their own website (the Earth Charter’s bibliography can be found at:

<http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/invent/images/uploads/Earth%20Charter%20Bibliography%20latest%2012%20May%202010.pdf>). They also promote the Earth Charter vision through two wonderful itinerant exhibitions translated into different languages: “Seeds of Change” (<http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/invent/details.php?id=476>) and “Seeds of Hope” (<http://www.sgi.org/resource-center/ngo-resources/education-for-sustainable-development/seeds-of-hope.html>).

Enlightened Self-Interest and the Earth Charter:

With greater ease of adoption in some places and/or institutions than in others, the Earth Charter movement needs to be expanded. Incompatibilities in the different value systems that are core to the ethical norms in different countries may account for this differential uptake.

Whether national values align more with Egalitarian, Communitarian or even Libertarian norms, the Earth Charter is complementary – and not in competition – with all value systems. Indeed, the Earth Charter should be compatible with diverse national value system as it was developed with meaningful inputs from a variety of different contributors, both national and international.

Efforts to have the Earth Charter formally recognized at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg (in 2002) came very close to success, resulting in numerous public statements of support from world leaders and heads of state (<http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/content/pages/History.html>). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) adopted a resolution in 2003, endorsing the Earth Charter for educational purposes, paralleling its own mission. In addition, among others, the International Agency for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) fully adopted the Earth Charter in 2005 as a basis for its own operations. Finally, Soka Gakkai International (SGI) is a Buddhist group that has been active with the Earth Charter for about 10 years.

If the Earth Charter is to be embraced universally across the broad array of social organizations and special interests, Buddhist virtues in a virtue ethics framework may be helpful in appealing to the notion of enlightened self-interest. It is enlightened self-interest that would permit collective support for the values and principles embodied in the Earth Charter and for embracing the Buddhist notion of wholeness.

The Earth Charter and Economic Well-being:

Through the Earth Charter, a return to the true meaning of the economic well-being of local communities everywhere is the aim. If this could be achieved, diversity and

the sustainability of life on Earth would be enhanced. As mentioned before, the meaning of the word “economy” has been usurped, away from its origins. It has become a globalized notion that puts economic interests above all else – an odious and pervasive form of counter-religion where talent and resources are sacrificed to the unholy trinity of Greed, Depredation, and Oppression. This fact alone alerts us to the need for virtuous conduct consistent with the principles of the Earth Charter.

Different ways of measuring social well-being in the context of community development range from the unfortunate universal adoption of the Gross National Product (GNP) in most countries, to the recent adoption of Gross National Happiness (GNH) in one or two countries. GNP measures cash flows (on both good and bad things in a country), whereas GNH is a measure more akin to the Genuine Progress and Genuine Wealth Indicators.

Distinctions among these measures in relation to Buddhist virtues are identified; GNP being narrow in what it measures compared to the more multi-dimensional (and enlightened) approach taken using Genuine Progress/Wealth Indicators. Essentially, as a metric, GNP is incapable of measuring that which provides meaning to life, including happiness and enlightenment. At the end of the day, human beings are so much more than just production units. New indicators need to be developed with a view to new paradigms – as inspired by Buddhist values and Earth Charter principles.

In Conclusion:

The Earth Charter reveals not only connections among all aspects of life, but also inter-dependencies among universal human rights, respect for diversity, economic justice, democracy, and a culture of peace. Happiness as a Buddhist concept is the goal in community development, for both present and future generations. Expanded communications are needed for the further adoption of the Earth Charter.

And, further adoption of the Earth Charter is very much needed in our pain-stricken world. Despite centuries of philosophical reflection on the betterment of mankind – from different traditions, and notably Buddhism – cupidity, selfishness, and a callous indifference to the suffering of other beings are still universal hallmarks of human societies. The very same features that made the success of *Homo sapiens* as a species – and allowed us to survive and thrive in a once hostile environment – are likely to cause our demise in the end if nothing changes. It is a plain fact that our collective consciousness needs to evolve and transcend its old paradigms – if only to go on living in this world. And, the Earth Charter is a beacon that shows us the way.

Buddhism also offers a way out that is strikingly similar to the Earth Charter in many ways. It encourages us to reach beyond our limitations and make the best of the human experience by emphasizing the importance of reflection and soul-searching vs. short-term ego fixes, and the well-being of the community. It releases the soul from its shackles and allows it to soar to embrace others, the environment, and the whole universe. All things considered, the Earth Charter principles dovetail perfectly with the Middle Way. Perhaps it is not so revealing that Eastern and Western philosophies have come to similar conclusions through a virtue based assessment.

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Appendix

Principles (extracted from The Earth Charter)

I. RESPECT AND CARE FOR THE COMMUNITY OF LIFE

1. Respect Earth and life in all its diversity.
 - a. Recognize that all beings are interdependent and every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings.
 - b. Affirm faith in the inherent dignity of all human beings and in the intellectual, artistic, ethical, and spiritual potential of humanity.
2. Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love.
 - a. Accept that with the right to own, manage, and use natural resources comes the duty to prevent environmental harm and to protect the rights of people.
 - b. Affirm that with increased freedom, knowledge, and power comes increased responsibility to promote the common good.
3. Build democratic societies that are just, participatory, sustainable, and peaceful.
 - a. Ensure that communities at all levels guarantee human rights and fundamental freedoms and provide everyone an opportunity to realize his or her full potential.
 - b. Promote social and economic justice, enabling all to achieve a secure and meaningful livelihood that is ecologically responsible.
4. Secure Earth's bounty and beauty for present and future generations.
 - a. Recognize that the freedom of action of each generation is qualified by the needs of future generations.
 - b. Transmit to future generations values, traditions, and institutions that support the long-term flourishing of Earth's human and ecological communities.

In order to fulfill these four broad commitments, it is necessary to engage with the following:

II. ECOLOGICAL INTEGRITY

5. Protect and restore the integrity of Earth's ecological systems, with special concern for biological diversity and the natural processes that sustain life.
 - a. Adopt at all levels sustainable development plans and regulations that make environmental conservation and rehabilitation integral to all development initiatives.
 - b. Establish and safeguard viable nature and biosphere reserves, including wild lands and marine areas, to protect Earth's life support systems, maintain biodiversity, and preserve our natural heritage.
 - c. Promote the recovery of endangered species and ecosystems.
 - d. Control and eradicate non-native or genetically modified organisms harmful to native species and the environment, and prevent introduction of such harmful organisms.
 - e. Manage the use of renewable resources such as water, soil, forest products, and marine life in ways that do not exceed rates of regeneration and that protect the health of ecosystems.

- f. Manage the extraction and use of non-renewable resources such as minerals and fossil fuels in ways that minimize depletion and cause no serious environmental damage.
6. Prevent harm as the best method of environmental protection and, when knowledge is limited, apply a precautionary approach.
- a. Take action to avoid the possibility of serious or irreversible environmental harm even when scientific knowledge is incomplete or inconclusive.
 - b. Place the burden of proof on those who argue that a proposed activity will not cause significant harm, and make the responsible parties liable for environmental harm.
 - c. Ensure that decision making addresses the cumulative, long-term, indirect, long distance, and global consequences of human activities.
 - d. Prevent pollution of any part of the environment and allow no build-up of radioactive, toxic, or other hazardous substances.
 - e. Avoid military activities damaging to the environment.
7. Adopt patterns of production, consumption, and reproduction that safeguard Earth's regenerative capacities, human rights, and community well-being.
- a. Reduce, reuse, and recycle the materials used in production and consumption systems, and ensure that residual waste can be assimilated by ecological systems.
 - b. Act with restraint and efficiency when using energy, and rely increasingly on renewable energy sources such as solar and wind.
 - c. Promote the development, adoption, and equitable transfer of environmentally sound technologies.
 - d. Internalize the full environmental and social costs of goods and services in the selling price, and enable consumers to identify products that meet the highest social and environmental standards.
 - e. Ensure universal access to health care that fosters reproductive health and responsible reproduction.
 - f. Adopt lifestyles that emphasize the quality of life and material sufficiency in a finite world.
8. Advance the study of ecological sustainability and promote the open exchange and wide application of the knowledge acquired.
- a. Support international scientific and technical cooperation on sustainability, with special attention to the needs of developing nations.
 - b. Recognize and preserve the traditional knowledge and spiritual wisdom in all cultures that contribute to environmental protection and human well-being.
 - c. Ensure that information of vital importance to human health and environmental protection, including genetic information, remains available in the public domain.

III. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE

9. Eradicate poverty as an ethical, social, and environmental imperative.
- a. Guarantee the right to potable water, clean air, food security, uncontaminated soil, shelter, and safe sanitation, allocating the national and international resources required.

- b. Empower every human being with the education and resources to secure a sustainable livelihood, and provide social security and safety nets for those who are unable to support themselves.
 - c. Recognize the ignored, protect the vulnerable, serve those who suffer, and enable them to develop their capacities and to pursue their aspirations.
10. Ensure that economic activities and institutions at all levels promote human development in an equitable and sustainable manner.
- a. Promote the equitable distribution of wealth within nations and among nations.
 - b. Enhance the intellectual, financial, technical, and social resources of developing nations, and relieve them of onerous international debt.
 - c. Ensure that all trade supports sustainable resource use, environmental protection, and progressive labor standards.
 - d. Require multinational corporations and international financial organizations to act transparently in the public good, and hold them accountable for the consequences of their activities.
11. Affirm gender equality and equity as prerequisites to sustainable development and ensure universal access to education, health care, and economic opportunity.
- a. Secure the human rights of women and girls and end all violence against them.
 - b. Promote the active participation of women in all aspects of economic, political, civil, social, and cultural life as full and equal partners, decision makers, leaders, and beneficiaries.
 - c. Strengthen families and ensure the safety and loving nurture of all family members.
12. Uphold the right of all, without discrimination, to a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity, bodily health, and spiritual well-being, with special attention to the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities.
- a. Eliminate discrimination in all its forms, such as that based on race, color, sex, sexual orientation, religion, language, and national, ethnic or social origin.
 - b. Affirm the right of indigenous peoples to their spirituality, knowledge, lands and resources and to their related practice of sustainable livelihoods.
 - c. Honor and support the young people of our communities, enabling them to fulfill their essential role in creating sustainable societies.
 - d. Protect and restore outstanding places of cultural and spiritual significance.

IV. DEMOCRACY, NONVIOLENCE, AND PEACE

13. Strengthen democratic institutions at all levels, and provide transparency and accountability in governance, inclusive participation in decision making, and access to justice.
- a. Uphold the right of everyone to receive clear and timely information on environmental matters and all development plans and activities which are likely to affect them or in which they have an interest.
 - b. Support local, regional and global civil society, and promote the meaningful participation of all interested individuals and organizations in decision making.
 - c. Protect the rights to freedom of opinion, expression, peaceful assembly, association, and dissent.

- d. Institute effective and efficient access to administrative and independent judicial procedures, including remedies and redress for environmental harm and the threat of such harm.
 - e. Eliminate corruption in all public and private institutions.
 - f. Strengthen local communities, enabling them to care for their environments, and assign environmental responsibilities to the levels of government where they can be carried out most effectively.
14. Integrate into formal education and life-long learning the knowledge, values, and skills needed for a sustainable way of life.
- a. Provide all, especially children and youth, with educational opportunities that empower them to contribute actively to sustainable development.
 - b. Promote the contribution of the arts and humanities as well as the sciences in sustainability education.
 - c. Enhance the role of the mass media in raising awareness of ecological and social challenges.
 - d. Recognize the importance of moral and spiritual education for sustainable living.
15. Treat all living beings with respect and consideration.
- a. Prevent cruelty to animals kept in human societies and protect them from suffering.
 - b. Protect wild animals from methods of hunting, trapping, and fishing that cause extreme, prolonged, or avoidable suffering.
 - c. Avoid or eliminate to the full extent possible the taking or destruction of non-targeted species.
16. Promote a culture of tolerance, nonviolence, and peace.
- a. Encourage and support mutual understanding, solidarity, and cooperation among all peoples and within and among nations.
 - b. Implement comprehensive strategies to prevent violent conflict and use collaborative problem solving to manage and resolve environmental conflicts and other disputes.
 - c. Demilitarize national security systems to the level of a non-provocative defense posture, and convert military resources to peaceful purposes, including ecological restoration.
 - d. Eliminate nuclear, biological, and toxic weapons and other weapons of mass destruction.
 - e. Ensure that the use of orbital and outer space supports environmental protection and peace.
 - f. Recognize that peace is the wholeness created by right relationships with oneself, other persons, other cultures, other life, Earth, and the larger whole of which all are a part.