

Buddhism and Disaster

Speaker : Dr. Tavivat Puntarigvivat

Moderator: Dr. Chris Stanford

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On the First Sunday of the Month of May 2011 (May 1, 2554), Dr. Tavivat Puntarigvivat was the guest speaker of the Buddhist Forum talking on "**Buddhism and Disaster.**" Dr. Tavivat Puntarigvivat is currently the Director of the Institute of Research and Development at the World Buddhist University in Bangkok. He is also the Secretary General of the Outstanding Women in Buddhism Awards Committee, which has been awarding prominent Buddhist women from around the world each year, in honor of the United Nations International Women's Day in Bangkok for more than 7 years by now. He was the Editor-in-Chief of the *WFB Review*—an international academic journal on Buddhism—published by the World Fellowship of Buddhists during 2002-2008.

Dr. Tavivat Puntarigvivat has served as the chairman of the graduate program in Comparative Religion at the Humanities Department, Mahidol University in Thailand for three terms: 1995-1997, 1999-2001, and 2007-present. He has been teaching in the Comparative Religion program at Mahidol University for over three decades. He specializes in such subjects as: *Methodology in Religious Studies, History of Religions in China, Tibet, and Japan, and Buddhism in Thai Society*. His current research includes such areas as: *Buddhism and Transnational Capitalism, Buddhism and Philosophy of Science, and Buddhism and Contemporary Thai Society*.

Dr. Tavivat Puntarigvivat received his B.A. in Economics from Thammasat University in Thailand in 1972, his M.A. in Philosophy from the University of Hawaii with a Rockefeller Fellowship in 1975, and his Ph.D. in "Religion and Society" from Temple University in Philadelphia, U.S.A., with a

Temple University Scholarship in 1994. His doctoral dissertation was a study of “Bhikkhu Buddhadasa’s Dhammic Socialism in dialogue with Latin American Liberation Theology.” He was also a researcher on “Zen Buddhism” at Kyoto University in Japan, with a Japanese Ministry of Education (*Monbusho*) scholarship from 1984-1986.

Dr. Tavivat Puntarigivat has researched and published extensively, both nationally and internationally, on issues of religion and social ethics—especially from cross-cultural and socio-political perspectives. He has been invited to be a guest lecturer at universities and academic institutions in the United States, such as Temple University, and in Thailand at Thammasat University, Chiangmai University and the Police Cadet Academy. He has been invited to join research projects in the United States, such as *What Men Owe to Women: Resources from the World Religions* led by Dr. John C. Raines and Dr. Daniel C. Maguire (published by SUNY in 2000), and *Liberation Theology in the World’s Living Religions* led by Dr. Miguel A. De La Torre (publishing in progress), in which he contributed from the Thai Theravada Buddhist perspective and experience.

Dr. Tavivat Puntarigivat began his lecture by saying that the world today is facing many kinds of disaster natural or manmade. He himself saw two perspectives of human disaster. They are external and internal factors for human disaster. The external factors include natural and manmade disasters. For natural disaster, we can see earthquake that has upset the world more often nowadays in Haiti, New Zealand, China and the latest shock — an earthquake and tsunami that hit northeast Japan. Many years ago, the disaster killed hundreds of thousands of people in Chile and Southeast Asia. It seems that we cannot control the external factors for disaster. They happen as a natural cause of events. Related to natural disaster is a manmade disaster. In Japan case, Tsunami and earthquake changed the nuclear plant. It causes a great trauma not only to the Japanese but also around the area

and all the people in the world. This nuclear plant damage comes with the 25th anniversary of Chernobyl nuclear disaster. There, some two million people suffer illnesses caused by the radiation and the reactor remains a serious threat to Europe. This is a sign marking that we get danger not only from nature but also from what human beings have created. In this connection, the Thai government that has a plan to build five nuclear power plants keeps silent for a moment. Unlike some countries in Europe e.g. the German government stopped the nuclear project and reviewed the construction that was going on. This is a kind of step to face manmade danger. We should rethink about it. Of course, the nuclear power plant damage warns us of manmade disaster.

Another one which we all know is the global warming. It is having a severe impact on the amount of snow and ice, which has serious climate change induced hazards such as floods, landslides, and droughts will impose significant stresses on the livelihoods of mountain people and downstream populations. It has happened over the last three or four hundred years since the first industrial revolution in England. Human beings emit carbon dioxide to the atmosphere little by little. In the last fifty years, many nations emit a lot of carbon dioxide to the globe. This is a kind of manmade factor that can damage the world. The global warming melts the ice at the north and the south poles. It makes the sea level rise. The sea water takes up many lands along the coast of all continents and some nations particularly some small island countries lose their physical surroundings. This is a physical factor for human disaster. At some point, it will shift the rotation of the globe and cause climate change in a sudden way. Thailand as a hot country would be shifted into another latitude and suddenly Thailand would have snow.

Dr. Tavivat himself saw human disaster from a socio-political perspective. As individual, we could do very little about it. In the Middle East, we saw a lot of conflicts going on. Around the world, many countries have

social problems, political problems and problems of occupation, exploitation, and violation of human rights, women's rights and children rights. These are social factors for human disaster. In some countries, there is racism. In Thailand, we face a political conflict: the red shirt and the yellow shirt. And now, it seems that the yellow shirt is no longer with the present government due to different ideas of political thoughts.

Certainly, Buddhism can contribute something to this human disaster. Buddhism presents what we call Buddhist economics for an alternative. One particular idea on Buddhist economics which is quite essential to politics is GNH (Gross National Happiness), based on Buddhist spiritual values. The Bhutanese grounding in Buddhist ideals suggests that beneficial development of human society takes place when material and spiritual development. If we ask ourselves as human beings what is the purpose of life. We work very hard to gain material wealth. We feel fatigue. We have a lot of stress and strain. Is that our purpose of life? If we work less and we are content of what we have, we can spend our time with our family, we do some hobbies that we really love, we can practice meditation to calm down our mind and make us happy. Which is better? The Bhutanese prefer the latter. They are not active in terms of economics. They live their traditional life. The Bhutanese once said, "A country is like a human being." It seems that every country in the world work so hard trying to develop material wealth and solve economic problem. The purpose of Bhutan is the happiness of the population. If we can make the people in the country happy, we fulfill the purpose of the sustainable and equitable socio-economic development. Japan is a very rich country in terms of GNP. Yet, the statistics points out that the Japanese committing suicide was raised up approximately 30,000 people each year. Last year, it was increased to 40,000 people. The Bhutanese purpose of development is not to gain material wealth but it is how to make the people in a given country happy. The people have warmth. They share and live

together peacefully. They present a satire word GNH instead of GNP. The term "Gross National Happiness" was coined in 1972 by Bhutan's former King Jigme Singye Wangchuck. He used the phrase to signal his commitment to building an economy that would serve Bhutan's unique culture occur side by side to complement and reinforce each other. The four pillars of GNH are 1)the promotion of sustainable ad equitable socio-economic development, 2) the preservation and promotion of cultural values, 3) the conservation of the natural environment, and 4) the establishment of good governance.

- 1) Considering the promotion of sustainable and equitable socio-economic development, it seems that Bhutan can reach the purpose of the country. If we develop the country and the rich get richer while the poor get poorer, the income gap is widened. The poor can struggle against the rich as apparent in the Middle East today. In Thailand, the political conflict is due to people who feel they are not given enough justice. They feel they are treated unjust. They gather to protest and demand democracy as well as one standard.
- 2) Considering the preservation and promotion of cultural values, it seems that Bhutan is a very exotic country for tourists. Everybody would love to see its traditional way of living, architecture and environment. Bhutan has a quota for tourists. Only 2000 tourists are allowed to visit Bhutan each year. This is opposite to the Tourist Authority of Thailand that has set up a target of 15,000,000 tourists for the next year. This is evident that the Thai government encourages more tourists for more money while the Bhutanese government limits the number of tourists for the sake of local heritage.
- 3) Considering the conservation of the natural environment, Bhutan has been able to protect its environment and keep Bhutan as

natural as one can. Global warming is due to human beings that damage the environment. The West accuses China and India for emitting carbon dioxide to the climate. China and India argue that the West has emitted carbon dioxide since the 17th century.

- 4) Considering the establishment of good governance, it seems Bhutan has fulfilled its purpose. Without good governance, people are unhappy and GNH cannot happen.

The essence of good governance is that we should make the transparency of governance. We should make people feel that they all receive justice. If we feel that we are treated unjust. We feel disturb in the mind. The inherent disturb will break out as a social disturbance. Justice as found in the society should bring peace to all. Without justice, there should be a lot of conflict and trouble.

Dr. Tavivat pointed out that Buddhism would like people to face the external factors of human disaster with awareness and calmness. Japan is a good example of the latest great disaster from Tsunami and plant damage. If it had happened in a different country, trouble would have been a lot more. The Japanese are much disciplined due to Buddhism which has been deep down in their heart for thousands of year. The Buddha teaches us to have awareness and consciousness. We should be calm. Together with wisdom, we can do the best at that particular moment. There are many times when we are over excited and lose our temper as well as awareness. That could cause a lot of human damage.

The internal factors for human disaster are with human beings. As human beings, we have two kinds of suffering or disaster: physical suffering and psychological suffering. Our body is subject to the environment physically and socially. According to the Indian philosophy, we face the cycle of a human life-sickness, birth and death. People have always tried to solve these problems. In the long history of humankind, man has strived for eternity.

Once, we cannot overcome the physical death, we project clear metaphysical reincarnation as a human fear of extinction. In ancient Egypt, people made mummies in the hope that the dead would come to life. In China, people have tried to find some ways to extend their life and search for immortality. Yet, no one could escape death. In India, they have tried to overcome the physical death with metaphysical reincarnation because history proves that no human being can come alive after death. The Indian people are philosophical. They say people only die physically but the spirit will come out from the physical body and find a fresh new body. Once this theory is taught, it can calm down the mind. It can fulfill the deep hope of human beings. We can have an eternal life after physical death. This is the idea of rebirth. Whether it is true, nobody can tell us. There is no scientific proof of it. If we believe it, it is true. If we do not believe, it is not true. It is just fate or belief. India presents this metaphysical reincarnation and Buddhism. The Buddha refuses the metaphysical reincarnation of Brahmanism. He also says the belief in the man extinct after death is wrong. The Buddha refuses this first view and the second view is a puzzle. This is a dilemma

Dr. Tavivat interpreted from a more scientific point of view. Most of us have our beloved children. Our cell is transmitted to them. Our children will represent us at the time we die. Though we disappear from the world, our children will see this world for us. Our children will carry our DNA or gene to the next generation. For most people, we feel relaxed. We have our children to carry on our work in the planet. We can now die.

With regard to the psychological suffering or disaster, which is the main point in Buddhism, we have greed, anger and delusion. These three issues are identified as defilement rooted in the term "ignorance." It doesn't mean academic ignorance of specific knowledge. It means the lacking state of awareness (Sati). Once we have Sati, the wisdom will come. The term wisdom is very specific and leads to awareness. If we do not develop

awareness, we are full of ignorance. If we do not do meditation, we will be full of unawareness. Ignorance thus also means unawareness of ourselves.

In summary, human beings face two kinds of disasters: 1) external factors of human disaster including natural disaster, manmade disaster and socio-political disaster 2) internal factors of human disaster, our physical body and mind. When we are sick, we face suffering. We should go to see the doctor. We also face psychological suffering which is subtle. No one can help us. We can go to see the psychiatrist and he will make us calm with chemicals. We are subject to medicine. In Buddhism, it depends on our understanding and practice. If we practice correctly, we can develop awareness. So we are alert. Drowsiness and unhappiness will disappear and we will live a quality life. The main idea of Buddhism is to develop awareness. The world today is more unpredictable. Natural disaster occurs more severely and frequently. We as individual can do very little to the external factors of human disaster such as Tsunami and earthquake. Yet, we should gather awareness, get calm and use our wisdom at the very moment to see what the best we can do is.

A question from the floor asked whether we should believe in the prediction of the large scale disaster coming soon. Dr. Tavivat said the essential teaching of the Buddha is to cope with psychological suffering. During the Buddha's time, metaphysical ideas and a lot of rumors and predictions were going on. These are not the essence of Buddhist teaching. The Tipitaka or Buddhist scripture has been written and revised many times and the issues of predictions could be added. They are not essential enough to deal with. The key point to the mind is to see the cause of suffering and the cessation of suffering.

Another question from the floor was pinpointed at the Japanese response to the latest disaster. Is there anything in Mahayana

Buddhism related to that sacrificial spirit? Dr. Tavivat said the main idea of Japanese Mahayana Buddhism is the idea of Bodhisattva or self –sacrifice for the welfare of others. Once there is natural disaster, people will react very quickly to have a relief effort to those who are suffering. The Mahayana countries like China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea and Vietnam perform a lot better than Theravada countries like Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Sri Lanka because of this prominent idea of Bhodisattva. However, both Theravada and Mahayana countries are taught to face disaster with awareness and calmness and use the best of wisdom at that moment. In relation to the Japanese committing suicide, it is a part of the Bushido, a particular Japanese culture without any share from Mahayana culture. The Japanese feel they should live with dignity. Without dignity, the Japanese can commit Harakiri.

Related to justice, a question on the privilege of people in the society was asked. Dr. Tavivat said this is the heritage from the feudal system in the ancient time when the king got absolute power. The special ranks have been taken into practice until nowadays. People address the others according to the social ranking.

One more question on the belief was asked. When the Christians encounter disaster, they will say it is the will of God. Dr. Tavivat said in Buddhism there is no original sin. We can explain physical disaster or external disaster scientifically. We have reasons why tsunami happens. Once, we can explain about it, we know the cause of disaster and we know how to deal with it. In Buddhism, there is no God. We believe only in cause and effect. Though psychological disaster is more difficult to see, Buddhism can explain and present a way to deal with cause and effect. Otherwise, if we do not know how to explain e.g. miracle and supernatural, we leave it alone. The Buddhists do not believe in magic or supernatural.

A question asked whether the victims of disaster are a result of the working of Karma. Dr. Tavivat said the idea of Karma is the Indian way of thinking existed before the time of the Buddha. It is the theory that tries to explain what is going on. The law of Karma is taught to present morality. If we do something good, the universe will reward us. . If we do something bad, the universe will punish us. Yet, we do not really know if it is working or not. Many of the victims of Tsunami might do something good and many of them might do something bad. Yet, they die at the same time in the same event. The law of karma serves as a metaphysical speculation to calm down the mind. People will fear and do good. Once we believe in the Buddha's teaching, it is true to us. If we do not believe in it, it is not true and it is not perfect. This is based on the belief absolutely. It is all relative in that sense.