

Sustainable Brands '15 Bangkok

A keynote under the theme of 'Reimagine'

Building a Brand ... the Buddhist Way

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It is a nature of business to be busy, I guess, so I can see everyone is jumping and moving around with excitement, expectation and exchanging with each other in this important convention. If you allow me I would like to change your mood for this morning to be a sustainable and mindful morning for learning. Therefore, I would like to request all of you to connect with yourself before connecting with others. Allow me to lead all of you to a short sustainable mental preparation before my presentation? This is sometimes call meditation!

[First thing, do keep in the mind that we all are here for this convention and this entire conference is one big meditation on sustainability. The essence of this is how we live our life from moment to moment and how present we are and everything that everybody said has direct input to our this heartbeat in us. Let us check in on ourselves. You don't even have to sit up straight, seriously. Any posture could be a posture of wakefulness. You don't even have to close your eyes. Can you simply drop in on this moment exactly as it is? The good place to start, the Buddha taught is the first foundation of mindfulness, the body. It is good place to start because we can't live without it. So the body, the breath can we just be here and sustain in awareness, grounded in the body? Do not let any sound, thought, emotion disturb your awareness. Gather yourself here and now. Simply watch your breath attentively.....

Please wake from this right here. Resting in awareness. Grounded in the body and embrace peacefully everything arises around you with a sharp knowing. Be the knowing, the Buddha, that is the invitation. Then can you expand the field of your awareness to people sitting next to you. People you might be touching, all of us in this room because we are in some profound way touching each other. Can we hold all of this gathering in this one moment and expand this feeling to our friends and family, to our nation and the world? Rest in here in the sense of deep interconnectedness and appreciation for us being a part of larger web of connectedness. Thank you!]

I am truly grateful to the Thailand Management Association (TMA) and Sustainable Brands 2015 Bangkok for having done me the honour of inviting me to speak on this keynote session. Standing in front of you here I am wondering which hat I should wear this morning although a monk's costume does not include a hat! If I were here with my monastic hat I should have been the first one to inaugurate the convention with a proper Buddhist chanting even before the Chairman's welcome remark. But the convention has already inaugurated without my service as a Buddhist monk. However, the organizer scheduled me to speak first at this much esteemed convention. On my part, I wondered am I the right person to speak on the subject. Generally, Buddhism and business are two opposite sides of the story although both started its alphabet with 'B.' Buddhism is all about reducing

greed while business is all about indulging greed! Therefore, I don't see any similarities between my goal of disengaging myself with my desire and your goals of promoting your desire as well as doing everything within your power to enhance desire of others even by all means of false branding and cost of advertisement.

Well, I am truly in an awkward position here. Talking about the given title "Building a Brand... the Buddhist Way" it really confused me as many people see that Buddhism is nothing to do with brandings although Buddhism as a world class brand has been sustained successfully with us for over 25 centuries. Based on the list of the speakers who represent each business firm in this convention I could be mistakenly listed under Buddhist business firm, if there is one as such. Unfortunately, I am not a CEO of any Buddhist business firm and not even an abbot of the Wat. In Thai society, 'Buddha-phanit' or Buddhist commercialization becomes a buzz word these days. We all know that it has become one of the unfavourable aspects of current Thai Buddhism. Using Buddhism for a business purpose or even use it as trademark to increase revenue. In worst, we have witnessed a 'bun-market' or market of merit these days where we branded 'bun' or 'merit' and market it in the society. Moreover, whether we like it or not, in the business world brands like 'Buddha Bar,' 'Nirvana,' 'samsara,' etc. have been with us for a while. We can witness how Buddhism is used in branding itself in the modern society as a production. Economically, needless to say that how Buddhist commercialization itself in Thailand shares some good percentage of national economy. But again, personally I am not a 'Buddha-phanit' monk. I don't make amulets and sale, I don't sprinkle holy water, I don't pray for people's fortune, I don't do job of fortune-teller and of course I don't fix someone's karma. And obviously I am not here to forecast future successful brands for you. The most I can contribute to this convention is to complain about your work ethics from a monastic point of view.

This morning's session is on the theme of 'Reimagine' which means that how to imagine anew or how do we form a new conception of our business, our life style or our world. The first known use of the term 'reimagine' was around 1934. This signifies that the way we perceive world need to be changed. We have to see it with our fresh eyes and new understanding. We are trying to rectify our mistakes from the past which was left to us by our ancestors. We recognised the bad policies our predecessors took which in result causing depletion of resources, problem of population and creating pollution. Unlike in the ancient times, these days the world changes fast so we need to reimagine plan and policies our predecessors laid out for us. At the same time we have to meditate on our actions. What are we going to leave behind for our future generations? Are we going to leave same idea, philosophy and problem just as we have received from our ancestors as their legacies?

'Reimagine' is indeed necessary for betterment of our world. The betterment is not only limited to our generation but future generations to come. Therefore, how do you reimagine your business and brands? If I ask, are you satisfied with your present business and brands in midst of current economic recession. I am sure that I will get answer in opposite. Moreover, there are more factors both from internal and external sources which demand us to run our business a new way. Today, we are talking about CRS, sustainability, sufficiency economy, GNH, resources, globalization, and franchises and so on. We need to reimagine our scope of business and brands. Equally, do not forget that business is about dealing with human. Because of that, religion and culture play significant role in economy although it seems not directly related. For example, modern trend of religious requirement of Halal becoming a big issue in the business world as big number of consumers adhere Islam. Halal is not limited to foodstuff alone like in the past. Now every

goods require Halal trademark on it if we want to expand our market in the Islamic countries. Therefore, doing branding and business you can't ignore the role of religion and culture.

Therefore, in the wake of sustainable brands, we need to learn how to reimagine our business, life and world to suit the fast pace changing modern society.

Sustainable – a trendy word of the decade

No one would argue against me if I say this decade is a decade of sustainability. We have been hearing about sustainable in every field till some already get allergic to it. For example, I am one of them who is allergic to this term sustainable which really made me think hard before I accept the invitation to speak today. I am getting allergic to it not because I am against the idea behind sustainability but I see it as another fancy term to add on to our modern conversation. These days if you don't add the term sustainable into your business, plan, or policy and even public speeches you become someone from the distance past. Of course, no one wants to hold on to Flintstone age. Therefore, sustainability becomes our modern mantra of this decade.

It was only 28 years ago that the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development released the report *Our Common Future* (1987). The report included what is now one of the most widely recognised definitions of sustainable development: "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

As a footnote, this is the same time that UNESCO proposed another solution for degrading world by presenting another term of 'cultural development.' However, UNESCO's branding was not successful as United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development. Therefore, branding of 'sustainable development' won over 'cultural development.'

But what does this mean? What are the needs of the present? Take a minute and jot down five to ten needs that you have in your own life.

Have you listed any needs that conflict with one another? For example, if you listed clean air to breathe, but also listed a car for transportation, your needs might conflict. Which would you choose, and how would you make your decision? If within ourselves, we have conflicting needs, how much is that multiplied when we look at a whole community, city, country, and world? For example, what happens when a company's need for cheap labour conflicts with workers' needs for liveable wages? Or when individual families' needs for firewood conflict with the need to prevent erosion and conserve topsoil? Or when one country's need for electricity results in acid rain that damages another country's lakes and rivers?

How do we decide whose needs are met? Poor or rich people? Citizens or immigrants? People living in cities or in the countryside? People in one country or another? You or your neighbour? The environment or the corporation? This generation or the next generation? When there has to be a trade-off, whose needs should go first?

People concerned about sustainable development suggest that meeting the needs of the future depends on how well we balance social, economic, and environmental objectives--or needs--when making decisions today. Isn't that sustainability we are talking about?

What social, economic, or environmental needs would you add to the puzzle?

Many of these objectives may seem to conflict with each other in the short term. For example, industrial growth might conflict with preserving natural resources. Yet, in the long term, responsible use of natural resources now will help ensure that there are resources available for sustained industrial growth far into the future.

Studying the puzzle raises a number of difficult questions. For example, can the long term economic objective of sustained agricultural growth be met if the ecological objective of preserving biodiversity is not? What happens to the environment in the long term if a large number of people cannot afford to meet their basic household needs today? If you did not have access to safe water, and therefore needed wood to boil drinking water so that you and your children would not get sick, would you worry about causing deforestation? Or, if you had to drive a long distance to get to work each day, would you be willing to move or get a new job to avoid polluting the air with your car exhaust? If we don't balance our social, economic, and environmental objectives in the short term, how can we expect to sustain our development in the long term?

What sustainable development dilemmas do you and your family face in your everyday lives?

I am sure that we can't run away from this bombarding concept of sustainability in our age. Many have already well developed the idea and considered to be the sacred mantra of this age. As a result, they respectfully place it on an altar and worship it as a modern philosophy. This simply means they are good at praising and talking not applying it to the business and life. Isn't that what we call philosophy? Feeling good and good for quoting but far away from making it happen in life. For example, I am sure that we all are familiar with 'Sufficiency economy' a wise wisdom from His Majesty King of Thailand to solve a modern bad economy. But we praised and respect His Majesty's good wishes so much that now we place it on the altar and we respectfully renamed it as 'philosophy of sufficiency economy.' All national policies and every business sectors claim that their policies and business are guided under the philosophy of sufficiency economy by His Majesty. I questioned this practice do we really mean it or put sufficiency economy into action? Of course, the term is there as a 'sacred mantra' in everything what government or corporation claim they do. We are respectfully taking a good advice from His Majesty King to be a philosophy although the King himself never presented it as a philosophy in his royal speeches and uses. We hardly "walk the talk" of sustainable living and promoting the development of healthy communities.

Therefore, I indeed do have a problem with the modern uses of the term 'sustainability.' Let me draw some problems from its widely used definition.

Undoubtedly, this is the economic age and accordingly the idea behind sustainability is economy. In this age of environmental loss and degradation, the main concern of modern economy suddenly shifted to environment. Consequently, we gave birth to new brands like 'green economy.' Suddenly, it became a fashionable term to use adjective 'green' for everything. In trending Buddhism, there even came a Buddhist book entitled 'The Green Buddha.' Or green Buddha became another synonym of sustainability.

What I understand of modern sustainability is a simple marriage between 'development' and 'environment' on one hand and 'economy' and 'ecology' in another hand. The crucial point of this is how do we master environment and ecology as a vital factor of development and economy?

Therefore, under popular definition of sustainability it emphasises on how do we 'compromise' the needs of the present and future generations? Please focus on the term

‘compromise.’ An English dictionary defines it simply as ‘settlement of a dispute by concessions on both or all sides.’ In another word, it is ‘to make a mutual promise.’ In this case promise what? We promise that we will consume less for the benefit of our future generations. Sounds perfect! But is that possible at all with unlimited human greed? I see that sustainability is dealing with impossible because from a western approach human needs and greed is natural. Human is master of everything in this world. Every resources in this world is there for human consumption. Therefore, the most we can do is to ‘compromise’ our natural greed.

I personally can’t accept this as Buddhism sees this world from totally different perspective under the law of interdependence. Human is not the master of this earth. Human is a small part of this global earth and we live under the law of interdependency. We are human because there is another human being to interact with. Our life is supported equally by environment and it is human task to keep environment intact for sustainability of humanity and the world. Therefore, I don’t see the holistic, integrated and balanced idea behind the popular idea of sustainability. Popular sustainability misses the ability of human being in training oneself not to be a part of the problem. Buddha said human desire should be studied and restrained not to compromise with it. Therefore, we have to reimagine our view and perception. We have to change the way we see and utilize the world. We have to learn and train how to fix our desire in the first place rather than compromise with our desire against others.

The Middle Path: ‘Sufficiency Economy’

Buddhism is summarised under the term ‘the Middle Path.’ Canonically, it is the middle way between two false views: indulgence and asceticism. However, the middle way is not a mere philosophical ideology but it is reflected in all aspect of human life i.e. social, political, economic, and psychological and so on. The pragmatism of the middle path simply means ‘reasoned moral self-discipline’ or to have mindfulness and awareness of the body which neither ignores it nor try to force fully master it. Simply, it is neither to force nor to please one’s mind or desire. Therefore, the middle path can apply in any circumstance of life.

Relating to economy, it is obvious that the world economy is heavily polarised to a certain extremism. Consequently, we are suffering from the economy which does not concern in ‘reasoned moral self-discipline’. In layman’s terms, the key of economy is human desire. From a Buddhist perspective there are two types of human desire: unlimited desire (i.e. aim for sensual desire) and disciplined desire (i.e. aim for a quality life).

Capitalist economy which devours the world economy at present is subservient to ‘the institution of unlimited desire.’ It is a kind of extremism leading to competition, snatching, exploitation, human fight, suffering, social violence, and destroys peace and prosperity. The consequence is an extremity (always in a worst direction). It lacks value to keep it on to the middle way. Therefore, His Majesty the King proposed sufficiency economy based on the middle way of Buddhism. It is the type of economy with ‘reasoned moral self-discipline.’ It is an economy based on disciplined desire. It is an economy based on compassion for others and environment. It is an economy based on sustenance of mankind and the earth. It is an economy allows you to enjoy life in peace and happiness with moderation simply by neither encouraging you to force your mind to a certain extremity nor to please your desire to a certain extremity. It is a well-balanced life – a well-balanced economy. This economy is eco-friendly and leading to happier life. The key concept is the

wise moderation in consumption, ideology, life-style and so on – the true life of the middle path.

Most importantly, this idea of well-balanced life is not a religious driven life style. Therefore, it goes beyond religious affiliations. In fact, the Buddha never claimed that his teachings were his invention at all. His teachings are basically ‘pointing out’ of the existed truth of the world and human nature. The benefit of this ideology can be experienced by the practitioner himself without ‘a belief.’ After all the ‘Buddha’ means ‘to know’ but not ‘to belief.’ Therefore, the sufficiency economy is an alternative economy producing not only individual mental happiness but a well-balanced economic growth of business as well. There is a clear example from the study of the ‘gross national happiness’ (GNH) of Kingdom of Bhutan that it not only produces happier society but desirable growth of ‘gross domestic product’ (GDP) as well. In fact, the core of GNH is another version of ‘the sufficiency economy’. Therefore, morally well-balanced economy is not relevant to religious adherents but human wisdom to produce a win-win situation between mankind and global resources. It is the showing of compassion and having responsibility for our own generation and future generations to come. It is a type of economy that does not encourage one to be selfish and self-centred so that we won’t steal and exploit what belongs to our future generations.

‘Contentment’ should be a crucial ingredient of sustainability although it is difficult to grasp and always misunderstood. Contentment is a satisfaction with what you get. It is the neuro-physiological experience of satisfaction and being at ease in one’s situation. In a Buddhist sense, it is the freedom from anxiety, want or need. Contentment is the goal behind all goals because once achieved there is nothing to seek until it is lost. In another words, contentment simply means a well-balanced life or a life of middle path. There are three types of contentment:

1. Contentment with what one gets and deserves to get
2. Contentment with what is within one’s strength or capacity, and
3. Contentment with what is befitting

From a Buddhist perspective, it is clear that contentment does not mean to suppress the human urge to gain physical wealth, mental happiness and so on. Contentment is the mental pacifying process as a result of extremism. It is not to be content for causes but consequences. This is clear from the Buddha’s advises on division of one’s rightfully earned money: ‘On one part he should live and do his duties towards others, with two parts he should expand his business, and he should save the fourth for a rainy day.’ Therefore, Buddha never asks a businessman to be content in investment but he encourages sustainable investment. Therefore, contentment is wisdom and source of a well-balanced life.

In fact, the idea behind sustainability or ‘sufficiency economy’ is to be mindful of all foreseeable and unforeseeable consequences of human actions. ‘Sufficiency economy’ is not anti-globalisation, antimega-projects and anti-liberal market policies at all as some may think in that way. On the contrary, sufficiency economy encourages us to wisely ruminate on over all aspect of globalization, megaprojects and liberal market policies instead of just aiming at one dimensional consequence. Sufficiency economy produces a well-balanced physical and mental development. After all, the essence of man is the integration of body and mind therefore the development should be based on balanced consequence of both physical comfort and mental happiness. A proper application of

sufficiency economy teaches us to be responsible for projects and policies whether it is a global, national, organisational and individual.

How do we achieve sustainability?

In order to get to sustainability we think we should start it from our ethics. As a result, we have developed everything to ethics. These days we hear about environmental ethics, business ethics and social ethics etc. These subjects are taught widely in university courses. Hoping that if we have proper ethics to lead our life we can get to the sustainable lifestyle. In this process the problem is our understanding of the ethics itself. In the past ethics were derived from moral and religious grounds. Once religions fail its role in the society the ethics loss its grips from religions. We encourage secular ethics but still have a nature of divine order. Unfortunately, we considered our greed, hatred, conceit etc. as part of human nature. Therefore, to restrain this human nature we create ethics. Restraining means we are forcing against our own will. Therefore, most ethics become theory rather than manifesting it in our behaviour. It becomes a matter of compromise between human greed and sustainability which conflict in itself. Accordingly, the outcome is always unsustainable brands.

On the contrary, while a Buddhist perspective consider greed, hatred, conceit etc. as part of human nature as well but see it as rectifiable human nature. Nature of humanity is able to be trained and able to 'reimagine' for future betterment. In other word, we can reimagine our conditions, limitation, needs, and greed. With ability of 'reimagine' we can then set up our ethics for action with full awareness and willingly. Not against the grains like most ethics we are familiar with. We changed ethics to our virtues and wisdom so they become part of 'new us' in this age of sustainability.

Therefore, it is very important for us to reimagine our world. It is said that we first had an agricultural revolution 10,000 years ago. Slowly, only around 250 years ago we had an industrial revolution. But we are now at the turning point of the 3rd revolution i.e. sustainable revolution. The 3rd revolution requires to reimage human perception as we are an interdependent creature in this world. We don't own animal, environment and natural resource for human sake alone. I just hope that we have a clear understanding of it and can revolutionise smoothly.

Building a Brand ... the Buddhist Way

The 3rd revolution of human world is only possible with an inner revolution of human perception to develop it as a new foundation of reimagine. Therefore, how do we build a Buddhist brand suitable for the sustainable revolution age?

I would like to outline here four foundations of perception for building a brand the Buddhist way:

1. Buddhism sees that everything in this earth is existed nature and it operates according to the law of causality. Human is just part of this natural law of causality. Human beings are part of nature just like any other creatures or environment.
2. Being a part of natural law of causality what human acts does have direct repercussions to other parts of natural law. Equally any changes in nature does have direct impact upon human life both internally and externally as well as on relationship between human and nature.

3. Unlike other creatures human is a creature of evolvability who can be fully tamed or developed. Accordingly we prescribe many ethical practices for human to develop. Ethics is an education through which we develop our quality of intact humanity. We can develop ourselves to be a noble human being who can attain true independence and happiness.
4. One potentiality of a well-developed human being is able to change unsustainability to interdependence, integrated and well-balanced sustainability.

Once we use those Buddhist principles or worldviews as foundation for building a Buddhist brands we can clearly see the difference between western sustainable brands and Buddhist sustainable brands. While western sustainable brands only emphasises on external factors of economy, environment and society the Buddhist sustainable brands look at holistic, integrated and balanced factors of human development to go hand in hand with sustainable development.

This human cum sustainable development is only possible through the full process of human development. It can be developed by relating wisdom and ethics through mental qualities. In another word, how we relate reimagine and redesign through rebirth.

Therefore, a Buddhist brand is only possible when we accomplish rebirth (mental qualities or *Samādhi*) by yoking redesign (ethics or *sīla*) and reimagine (wisdom or *paññā*) together.

In a pragmatic formula, to give rebirth to a Buddhist sustainable brands one needs to accomplish sustainable effort, mindfulness and concentration (mental development) under the influence of reimagine of sustainable view and intention (wisdom) together with redesign of sustainable speech, action and livelihood (ethical conduct). In another word, the sustainable brands of Reimagine, Redesign and Rebirth is in fact no other than the Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path through which one achieves the perfection of life.

This type of Buddhist brand is then can truly call full sustainable brands amidst the nature of unsustainability. This is what we call a Nirvana or happiness.

As a reminding note, I would say that Buddhist happiness is another synonym of sustainability. Etymologically, sustainable was first used in 1610s to mean 'bearable.' Similarly, Buddhist happiness or *sukha* also etymologically means 'bearable' or 'feeling of ease.' Unlike western notion of happiness which lies on external factors rather than inner factors. Etymologically, English term happiness is derived from the term *hap* in the late 14th century which simply means luck or fortune which lies outside of self.

Therefore, a Buddhist happiness is indeed the quality we develop as a human being to able to tolerate and adjust oneself to new conditions all the time without going through any pain and enforcement. It is not kind of happiness conditioned under any compromises but it is a sustainable happiness one attain via well-balanced human action.

Buddha, therefore, compares a well-developed sustainability to a type of relationship developed between self and society as a bee consumes nectar out of flower. The Buddha says: 'As a bee — without harming the blossom, its colour, its fragrance — takes its nectar and flies away: so should the sage go through a village.' (*Dhammapada* 49)

This self-beneficial relationship without harming opposites should be the crucial mantra of sustainability. This model of interdependency should be promoted between human and environment as well as all creatures who share this planet with us. This is the heart of Buddhist sustainability – building a brand ... the Buddhist way.

Thank you.