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Facing the Future

*Four Essays
on the Social Relevance
of Buddhism*

Bhikkhu Bodhi



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Four Essays on the Social Relevance of Buddhism

by

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A Buddhist Social Ethic for the New Century



The arrival of a new century is always a time of great ferment and great expectations, and when the new century also marks the dawn of a new millennium our expectations are likely to be especially intense. An inherent optimism makes us think that the new is always bound to be better than the old, that the arrival of the next year or century will inevitably bring our wildest dreams to fulfillment. Unfortunately, however, life is not so simple that the mere ticking of the clock and a change of calendars are enough to undo the knots with which we have tied ourselves up by our rash decisions and ill-considered actions through all the preceding months, years, and decades.

One fact that past experience should deeply impress on us is the need to look carefully beneath the surface of events for hidden tendencies that portend future harm. The importance of this guideline is brought home for us by reflection on the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. In the Western world the end of the nineteenth century was a period of fervent optimism, of utopian dreams quickened by an unflinching faith in a

glorified ideal called progress. The twin leaders of the cult of progress were science and technology. Science was the new Prometheus, an unstoppable Prometheus that had snatched nature's hidden secrets and passed them on to a humanity brimming over with ardent hopes. In each decade, one major breakthrough in knowledge followed another, each fresh theoretical advance being matched by corresponding success in harnessing nature's powers to our needs. The result was a tremendous surge in the growth of technology that promised to liberate humankind from its most stubborn historical limitations.

The next century showed just how shortsighted this optimism really was. Indeed, for those who looked deeply enough, the seeds of destruction were already visible right beneath the feet of the proud conquistadors. They could be seen on the home front, in the miserable lives of millions of workers condemned to degrading toil in the factories, mines, and sweatshops; in the ruthless colonization of the non-Western world, the rape of its resources and subjugation of its peoples; in the mounting friction and tensions between ambitious empires competing for global domination. During the first half of the twentieth century the tensions exploded twice, in two world wars with a death count of many millions. These wars, and the ensuing cold war, brought into the open the dark primordial forces that had long been simmering just a little beneath the polished veneer of Western civilization. It is surely significant that our discovery of nature's most arcane secret—the

convertibility of matter and energy—conferred on us the capacity for total self-annihilation: unlimited power and total destruction arriving in the same package.

Today, as we stand at the beginning of the twenty-first century, our world has become a living paradox. It is a world of immense wealth, but also of grinding poverty where 1.3 billion people—a quarter of the world's population—live in constant want. A world of tremendous advances in medicine and health care, where eleven million people die annually from diseases that are easily treatable. A world where the daily trade in lethal weapons numbers in the millions of dollars, yet where seven million children die of hunger each year and 800 million people are severely undernourished. And perhaps most alarming of all, a world bent on unlimited economic growth on a planet whose finite resources are rapidly dwindling. Thus, with all our bold strides towards the future, our world still suffers from painful wounds, and the need for a solution, for a cure, has become ever more insistent if humanity is to survive intact through to the end of the new century.

In the course of this paper I wish to formulate a Theravada Buddhist response to the need to heal the wounds of the world. In popular textbooks on world religions, Theravada Buddhism is generally depicted as a religion of individual salvation which holds up as its ideal a purely private enlightenment to be reached through renunciation and meditation. Though Theravada Buddhism does stress the inescapably personal nature of the ultimate goal, if we

carefully examine the suttas or discourses of the Buddha, we would see that the Buddha was keenly aware of the problems human beings face in the social dimensions of their lives, and he formulated his teaching to address these problems just as much as to show the way to final liberation. Although these texts are nowhere as numerous as those dealing with personal ethics, meditation, and philosophical insight, they remain remarkable testimonials to the clear sociological acumen of the Awakened One. Even today they still offer clear-cut practical guidelines in devising a social ethic capable of addressing the problems peculiar to the present age.

The first principle

**that the Buddha's teaching
gives us**

... in responding to these problems is a methodological one: not to rush to foredrawn conclusions but to investigate the underlying causes at all levels, and not to stop until we have reached the deepest roots. The common tendency today, however, in tackling social problems is quite different. Particularly in political and economic circles, obstinate human dilemmas with subterranean roots are treated simply as technical snags that can be resolved merely by the application of the right technical solution. Thus, it is held, to counter the danger of global warming we must hammer out

a treaty on reducing emissions of greenhouse gasses; if crime and violence are on the increase, we need a larger and tougher police force; if drug addiction has reached alarming proportions among our youth, we need more effective controls against drug trafficking. Such measures may indeed be expedient safeguards against the grosser manifestations of the problems they are intended to rectify, but however effective and efficient they may be in the short run, on their own they do not provide long-term solutions. What they offer is cosmetic treatment, stopgap measures that should not be taken as substitutes for alternatives that operate at the level of the deeper root-causes.

When we adopt a Buddhist perspective on the wounds that afflict our world today, we soon realize that these wounds are symptomatic: a warning signal that something is fundamentally awry with the way we lead our lives. We would see these outer wounds as outgrowths of a more malignant wound hidden deep within, eating away at our vital strength and discharging its venom into our air, rivers, and oceans; into our forests and farmlands; into our family lives and homes; into our social relationships and political agendas. Thus, from the Buddhist point of view, what we really need to heal our common wounds is radical surgery, a far-reaching change in our collective views, attitudes, and lifestyles.

The word that enjoys currency these days as an expression for our need is “values.” We are told that the reason social conditions have degenerated so widely is because people

have abandoned traditional values, and all we need to solve our problems is a revival of those values. While such a recommendation can stir up waves of nostalgia in those disturbed by the spread of moral disorder, we must bear in mind that the mere call for a revival of traditional values will be utterly ineffective unless we are prepared to make some bold changes in the foundation on which values rest, namely, the aims, purposes, and sense of meaning that determine the social dimension of our existence. To attempt to revive private values in a corrupt and degrading society is like trying to beautify a chemical dump by planting roses along the banks: as long as the dump remains, the roses will only grow up stunted and deformed.

The transformation we need has to go further than the merely personal. It must embrace both aspects of our existence, the internal and the external, the personal and the social. These two dimensions of our lives are inseparably intertwined and mutually conditioning, so that our values reflect social and economic realities, while social and economic realities are shaped by our values. Thus, while it is in our personal lives that we have the most power to instigate direct change, any alternations in our personal lifestyles must also reach outwards and exercise an impact on our interpersonal relations, our social order, our political agenda, and our relationship to the natural environment. To avoid turning personal values into a lovely facade covering up social disorder and decay, critical and even painful self-examination is essential. We must be ready to examine with

complete honesty our own priorities and to see the dangers for ourselves and others in letting ourselves drift along with the current of egotism and selfishness that sweeps across the world. Without such honest self-criticism, any cry for a recovery of values, even Buddhist values, is bound to end in little more than pious platitudes—personally consoling, perhaps, but powerless to bring effective change.

When we set out to diagnose our global problems from a Buddhist perspective, we should recognize that an adequate diagnosis must take account of multiple levels of causality. One of the Buddha's most striking insights is that phenomena do not arise from a single cause but from a complex concurrence of many conditions operating at different levels. Whereas specialist studies deal with problems from within a closed and narrow frame of reference, a Buddhist approach would adopt a comprehensive point of view that takes account of many levels of causation, which crisscross and overlap, reinforcing each other at various turns. This allows for a more comprehensive solution, for when problems are approached from a limited frame of reference, the angle taken in viewing the problems already implies the solution. It is only when this "wide angle" perspective is adopted that we can grasp the various dimensions in which the problem projects itself, and thereby we can see the multitude of factors that must be addressed in drawing up a solution.

We also have to give heed to the "specific gravity" of the

different types of causation, that is, to the relative contribution they make to the problem as a whole. According to the Buddha the most powerful and weighty causal factor operative in human life is the mind. Though the mind is invisible, intangible, weightless, and dimensionless, it is the hidden vector behind all the other modes of causality—social, political, and economic. The mind does not operate in a vacuum, however: inevitably, it is always embedded in a specific historical and personal context, subject to the impact of a wide variety of influences which shape its perspectives and determine its dispositions. But while this is so, we must also note that all these other factors influencing the mind are at some level themselves manifestations of mental activity. Thus the other orders of causality affecting the mind—social, economic, cultural, and political—can in turn be considered objectifications of mind, embodying and “externalizing” specific attitudes, views, and psychological agendas. For this reason the Buddha says that “all conditions are preceded by the mind, dominated by the mind, fashioned by the mind” (Dhammapada, vv. 1–2).

When we recognize the enormous contribution the mind makes to every other level of causality, we can see at once that in order to heal the wounds that afflict our world today our most urgent task is to heal the wounds in our minds. Down the centuries, especially since the start of the Scientific Revolution in the West, we have been obsessed with the challenge of extending our control and mastery over the external world, but in our enthusiasm to master the

outer world and exploit it for our material ends, we have neglected an even more vital dimension of our being, namely, our own minds.

For this reason our triumphs in scientific knowledge and technology have been painfully lopsided. While we have made astounding strides in understanding the world, we have made very little progress in understanding ourselves; while we have tapped the hidden powers of nature and made them our servants, we have done very little to tame the controller of nature. For just this reason, our proud triumphs in science and technology have had a very mixed impact on humanity as a whole. Along with their unquestionable material blessings, they have brought devastation and deprivation, waste and carnage, impoverishment and misery for many millions.

The basic needs of human beings are really very simple, and in principle they should be easily met in ample measure for everyone. They include an acceptable standard of material security, fresh air and clean water, nourishing food, comfortable housing, medical care, education and information, and sufficient leisure to develop one's talents and faculties. Under the present system, however, a tiny percentage of people, hardly more than a handful, live in greater luxury than the emperors of ancient Rome, while over a billion people, a quarter of the world's population, are condemned to live below the poverty line. Isn't it ironic that while we can send out spacecraft to distant planets and manipulate them with hairpin accuracy, we still cannot feed

all the world's children? Isn't it alarming that while all indicators point to the massive threat to health and life from escalating pollution, unprecedented climate change, and the depletion of our natural resources, the nations most responsible for this crisis insist on pursuing unchecked their wasteful, exorbitant lifestyles? What prevents us from meeting the basic needs of all people on earth is not a scarcity of means but a failure of will, a failure rooted in selfishness and greed.

In the Buddha's teaching, the dark forces of the mind responsible for human suffering are called the defilements (*kilesa*), of which the most powerful are the three "unwholesome roots"—greed, hatred, and delusion. In its classical expression, the Buddha's teaching focuses upon the role of the defilements in our personal lives, showing how they are the determinants of psychological and existential suffering. Today, however, as our world has become tightly integrated into a single global order, a shift in emphasis is necessary if we are to analyze and address our common plight. Since institutions and organizations have become ever more influential in molding our circumstances and determining our destiny, we must closely investigate how the defilements assume a collective expression. We must lay bare the detrimental impact of our economic and political structures and discover how our forms of social organization, both national and international, sustain the grip of greed, hatred, and delusion upon our minds. For these structures do not merely objectify the mind's

defilements; they also reinforce those defilements and make their grip ever more difficult to cast off. By powerful strategies often hidden by camouflage and deceit, they nurture and support the mass of distorted views, unhealthy attitudes, and risky policies that wreak so much havoc in our societies and our lives.

Perhaps the most glaring example of this destructive potential in the last decade of the twentieth century is the unregulated free-market economic system, which today has acquired a global reach. The massive transnational corporations that dominate this economic order, driven by the quest for commercial profit, have turned into institutional embodiments of greed. Despite their impressive public-relations propaganda, their fundamental purpose is not to meet genuine human needs but to generate maximum profit at minimum cost. Profit is the fuel of corporate growth, and every profit target met generates only a still higher target; the ideal is never a state of stable equilibrium, but the achievement of limitless profit at zero cost.

For the commanders of the corporate culture nothing else ultimately matters but economic success. Carefully documented studies have shown that in the pursuit of greater financial gain the corporations are quite prepared to jeopardize the welfare of the work force, the health of the customers, the stability of the society, traditional norms and values, the harmony of the community, and the sustainability of the natural environment. In their view, if

the net result is a larger profit margin, all these can be sacrificed with barely a shrug of the shoulders.

The corporate economy is not only driven by its own inherent greed but its very success depends on arousing greed in others. For a company to sell its products, to grow and expand, it has to induce in others a desire to buy these products, and to the extent that these products do not meet genuine human needs (which is often the case) the desires must be provoked by deliberate strategies. Hence the twin disciplines of market research and advertising, which exploit every means available to push their clients' products. Television and radio, signboard and newspaper, pictures and jingles, slogans and songs, all are to be used to hammer home the message: "Buy this, buy that." The psychological sophistication that underlies the advertisement industry is astounding. There is hardly a human weakness it hesitates to play upon to promote sales: sexual attraction and status, pride and cupidity, fear and worry, arrogance and vanity—all are fair game in the drive to boost up profits.

Behind the specific advertising appeals there lies a more general assumption, an assumption never explicitly proposed but made absolutely compelling through countless images and slogans. This is the idea that consumption is the key to happiness. We are made to believe that the way to become happy is to indulge our desires. Happiness is identified with the acquisition of wealth and the enjoyment of commodities, and the more

costly and luxurious the goods, the more lavish is the promise of happiness. In the consumerist vision the enjoyment of goods is nothing less than The Good, the final, all-sufficient goal of human life.

If we use the Buddha's teachings as a lens to examine the corporate economic system and its offshoot, the consumerist culture, we will see that it is ultimately detrimental to the well-being of both its masters and servants alike. Drawing upon the tools of Buddhist analysis, let us briefly sketch the inner dynamics of this system. We see in the first instance that such a social order is founded upon ignorance or delusion (*avijjā, moha*), namely, the supposition that material wealth and consumption are the criteria of the good life. According to the Buddhist texts, when ignorance infiltrates our cognitive systems it issues in a series of "distortions" (*vipallāsa*) which infect our perception (*saññā*), thinking (*citta*), and views (*ditṭhi*). The Buddha mentions four such distortions: the notions that the impermanent is permanent, that the painful (or suffering) is pleasant, that the insubstantial is a self, and that the unbeautiful is beautiful. At the most basic level we perceive things by way of these distortions; when these distorted perceptions are taken up for reflection, we start thinking in terms of them; and finally, under the combined influence of distorted perception and thought, we adopt views—that is, beliefs, doctrines, and ideologies—that affirm the mistaken notions of permanence, pleasure, selfhood, and beauty.

In modern commercial culture these distortions—

conceptual manifestations of ignorance—dominate the thinking, attitudes, principles, and policy lines of both producers and consumers alike. The illusions of permanence, pleasure, self, and beauty are sustained by the images that have become such an intimate part of our lives: the happy family using a particular brand of soap, the beautiful woman standing beside the latest model car, the rugged cattle man smoking this particular brand of cigarettes, the self-assured executive drinking that particular brand of whisky. The inevitable outcome of this commercially aggressive campaign is the exaltation of craving and greed as the fuel of social and economic activity. In free-market economics, production is not geared towards the satisfaction of real need but towards the enhancement of commercial profit, which means that human desires must be subtly manipulated and expanded in a bid to enhance profits.

In subservience to the internal demands of this system, the elementary need for material sustenance, for the basic requisites of life, becomes blown up into an insatiable urge for status, power, and luxury. The masters of commerce strive to create in us a perpetual discontent, to induce feelings of inadequacy, to stir up the need to purchase more. As a result, envy and resentment replace contentment; titillation replaces satisfaction; prestige value eclipses life value. The one word to be banished from the dictionaries is “enough.” For the corporate-based economy to flourish there must never be enough, but always a thirst for more:

for the bigger, faster, and better; for novelty and variety.

In a newly affluent society perhaps the segment of the population most vulnerable to the tactics of commercial advertising is the youth. The promoters of consumerism know this well. They know how to capitalize on the tender psychological needs of the young—their rebelliousness and audacity, their compulsions and anxieties—and on the basis of this understanding they attempt to create a specific culture of youth that attaches prestige and prominence to the appropriate commodities. They also know how to control fashions and styles, to make the acquisition of replacements a recurring demand that triggers off regular sprees of buying. For religious cultures that thrive on such traditional values as simplicity, contentment, and self-control, the impact of the global corporate culture can be traumatic, rupturing the lifeline that sustains the transmission of traditional values from one generation to the next.

...glorification of the profit motive...

In sum, the glorification of the profit motive gives rise to a social order in which the underlying springs of social activity are the twin defilements of ignorance and craving.

The experts who defend this system, the advocates of free trade and globalization, tell us that the unrestrained functioning of the economy is the precondition for general human happiness, “the greatest happiness of the greatest number.” But what the Buddha teaches is just the opposite. In a social order governed by ignorance and craving, in which greed, reckless growth, and competition are the spurs to mass-scale human activity, the inevitable outcome has to be suffering and conflict. In the formula of the Four Noble Truths we find this expressed in psychological terms: “Craving is the origin of suffering.” Elsewhere the Buddha has made the same point with specific reference to the breakdown of social cohesion: “From craving comes the search for profit, from seeking comes the gain of profit, from gain comes discrimination, thence comes desire and lust, thence attachment, thence possessiveness, thence selfishness, thence hoarding; and from hoarding come many evil unwholesome things, such as the taking up of clubs and knives, quarrels, conflicts, and disputes, recrimination, slander, and falsehood” (Mahānidāna Sutta).

Ironically, the linking together of the world’s population in the globalized economy is accompanied by a progressive atomization of individuals which undermines their ability to function as cooperative, responsible members of their societies. This happens because the ultimate effect of corporate culture is to reduce the person to a mere consumer whose whole being centers on intensity and variety of private experience. In subtle ways that operate

below the threshold of perception, the consumerist conception of the good life cuts away at the bonds of community that unite the members of a social order into a unified whole. By appealing to those values that inflame egotism and selfish interest, it replaces social cohesion with a social atomism that locks each individual into a self-enclosed world of his or her own private concerns. The union of autonomous, responsible, disciplined individuals essential to a true community gives way to a “culture of narcissism” in which each person is obsessed with maximizing his or her own status, wealth, position, and power—the outward signs of material success. If we are puzzled why social discipline and responsibility have become so rare today, reflection on the above may provide an answer.

In such a culture as we find in the “developed” countries of the West, it is hardly surprising that the most basic unit of social formation, the family, has been virtually rent asunder. In the United States, the pioneer in establishing the “new world order,” roughly half the marriages end prematurely in divorce and almost fifty percent of American children grow up in one-parent homes. Even when family bonds endure, the atmosphere of family life has drastically changed from what it used to be in the past. No longer is the family a close harmonious unit held together by ties of love, respect, self-sacrifice, and cooperation. Instead it has become a symbiotic pact, a union of convenience, in which each member seeks his or her personal advantage, often by

exploiting and hurting the other members.

Earlier we saw that the internal dynamics of consumerist culture begin with ignorance or delusion, the assumption that happiness can be achieved through acquisitiveness and the enjoyment of goods. This belief conditions craving, the desire to acquire and enjoy, and the ultimate outcome is frustration, competitiveness, and conflict; in short, personal and collective suffering. In a social order governed by the Dhamma—and I use this word here not with narrow reference to Buddhism, but more broadly to signify the universal law of righteousness and truth—the inner dynamics would be the diametric opposite of the one governing the consumerist model. In a righteous society the role played by ignorance will be exercised by knowledge or wisdom, a basic shared understanding of the fundamental laws of wholesome living. In a predominantly Buddhist society this would include the law of kamma and its fruit, the benefits of generosity and ethical conduct, and some insight into the Four Noble Truths and the three characteristics of existence. Those whose lives are guided by this knowledge need not be perfect saints, and indeed in mass society very few will even approximate to any degree of sanctity. But when people are guided by the principles of the Dhamma they will understand where their true welfare is to be found, and this understanding will enable them to distinguish clearly between what is truly in their interest and what appears attractive on the outside but eventually leads to harm.

From the standpoint of practical life, this is the critical distinction. A person enveloped in ignorance easily falls prey to craving, blindly pursues wealth, power, and status, and brings suffering upon himself as well as others. A person guided by the Dhamma understands the true good, the highest goal of life. This understanding stimulates desire, but a kind of desire that is the exact opposite of craving. Craving is blind desire, a self-centered drive for sensual pleasure, power, and status. In contrast, the desire awakened by true knowledge is a wholesome desire, called in the texts “desire for the good” (*atthakāma*) or “desire for truth” (*dhamma-chanda*). Motivated by this wholesome desire, a person will engage in virtuous activities that lead to the realization of the good, and these activities will promote the well-being of both the individual and the community.

For Buddhism the highest goal is Nibbāna, liberation from ignorance and craving, release from the repetitive cycle of rebirths. In this paper I do not want to give a philosophical explanation of Nibbāna, but a practical one which will highlight the bearings the Dhamma has on our search for a viable social ethic. To go about this task, I intend to examine the experiential dimension of Nibbāna in a way that is not rigidly tied to the specific principles of Buddhist doctrine. One of my reasons for adopting such a general approach is to sketch a model for a righteous social order that can be readily appropriated by followers of other religious traditions, and also by those of no religious conviction who

recognize the need for a sane alternative to the consumerist ideal. The task of “healing the wounds of the world” is not one that any single spiritual tradition can handle alone. We live in a pluralistic society in a pluralistic world, and what is needed is a cooperative effort by all men and women of spiritual sensitivity regardless of their faith. While each religion and spiritual path has its own unique perspectives, underlying their obvious differences is a shared perception of the inherent dignity of the human person. It is this perception that must be recovered and safeguarded against the dehumanizing impact of the free-market economy and its offshoot, the consumerist society.

In terms of living experience, the ultimate goal of Buddhism combines four primary attributes: happiness, peace, freedom, and security. In Pali, the language of the early Buddhist canon, Nibbāna is called *parama sukha*, the highest happiness; *anuttara santivarapada*, the supreme state of sublime peace; *vimutti*, liberation or deliverance; and *anuttara yogakkhema*, the supreme security from bondage. While these aspects of Nibbāna may seem far removed from our present condition, a little thought will show that they link up with our most basic aspirations, indeed with the most basic desires of all human beings regardless of religious affiliation. When we consider the true motivation behind all our actions, it should be immediately clear that what we really desire most is a state that combines these four qualities: happiness, peace, freedom, and security. The reason we fail to attain them is not that we desire their

opposites—for no one deliberately seeks to be miserable, distressed, enslaved, and imperiled—but because we misconceive them and thus do not know how to attain them.

Under the influence of ignorance and delusion (*avijjā*), we seek our true good in the wrong direction, like a man who wants to go from Kandy to Colombo by heading north on the Matale road:

1. We cannot distinguish *true happiness* from sensual gratification, and thus we seek happiness by frantically pursuing sensual pleasures, which are transient, degrading, and bound up with anxiety. To try to extract real happiness from sensual pleasures, however, is like trying to satisfy one's thirst by drinking sea water: the more one drinks, the thirstier one becomes.
2. Again, we think that *peace* means the absence of conflict; thus we try to gain peace by subduing our opponents and by bullying our environment to serve our desires, unaware that this process is ultimately self-destructive.
3. We identify *freedom* with license, the freedom to act on impulse, to do whatever we wish; thus we demand the right to act impetuously, without having to pay the price, without having to bear responsibility for our irresponsible actions.
4. We think of *security* as protection from external harm; thus we shield ourselves in high-walled homes

equipped with high-alert security systems, yet we never feel completely safe but live in the shadow of fear, of an anxiety that swells up from within.

What the Buddha teaches so clearly is that we must look within to achieve the vital goal towards which we aspire. He points out that real happiness, peace, freedom, and security have to be attained by overcoming the mental fetters that bind us so tightly to suffering. These fetters are the mind's defilements: greed, hatred, and delusion, along with their many offshoots such as anger, malice, jealousy, stinginess, hypocrisy, obstinacy, conceit, arrogance, vanity, and heedlessness. Thus to win our goal, we must turn the beam of our searchlight upon the mind itself and invest our energy in the task of self-purification.

While Nibbāna itself, in its fullness, may be remote from the common person mired in mundane responsibilities, this does not mean it is completely inaccessible to us. For Nibbāna is defined as the destruction of greed, hatred, and delusion, and this means that the goal must be reached by a gradual process which centers on the task of diminishing greed, hatred, and delusion in our everyday lives. We might even speak of the goal as "bending back" or "reaching down" and intersecting with our everyday concerns, spelling out the prerequisites for its own attainment. To advance towards Nibbāna from where we presently stand means that we must work to attenuate the influence of the defilements in our daily conduct: in our deeds, words, and thoughts. What we must do is replace greed with non-

greed: with generosity, detachment, contentment, and simplicity. Instead of hoarding and accumulating things, Buddhism emphasizes the value of giving: the practice of generosity is the most effective way to erase the greed from one's own mind as well as to confer benefits on others. Instead of nurturing hatred and resentment, we are to develop loving kindness and compassion towards others, to cooperate with them in meeting our common goals, and to bear adversity with patience and equanimity. And instead of remaining in the clouds of delusion, we are to develop wisdom: to acquire understanding and insight into the invariable laws that underlie human existence.

The work of self-purification is to be undertaken by treading the Noble Eightfold Path, with its three divisions of virtue, concentration, and wisdom. Each of these three divisions of the path is intended to check and remove the defilements at successively subtler levels. The training in virtue, which comprises right speech, right action, and right livelihood, checks the outward expression of the defilements in transgressive action, in conduct that violates the norms of the moral life. The training in concentration, which comprises right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration, aims at eliminating the active eruption of the defilements into our thought processes. And the training in wisdom, which comprises right view and right intention, aims at eradicating the defilements at the most fundamental level, as subtle seeds in the deep recesses of the mind. It is only when these defilements have been completely

uprooted by wisdom, by direct insight into the true nature of phenomena, that ignorance is completely removed and knowledge fulfilled. And it is this that brings the realization of Nibbāna, the highest happiness, peace, freedom, and security right in this very life.

I want to emphasize here that while the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path is inescapably personal, requiring individual effort and diligence, this practice has consequences that are profoundly and inextricably social. As I pointed out earlier, society is not an abstract entity but the aggregate-mass of its individual members. If we compare society to an organism, then its members are like the cells; and just as the health of a body's cells affects the well-being of the physical organism, so the conduct, attitudes, and values of a society's members inevitably influence the health of the social organism.

We need cherish no illusions that it will be feasible to marshal an entire society to walk along the Noble Eightfold Path. It is difficult enough even to get people to live a decent upright life governed by sound moral guidelines. The forces of darkness, of materialism and consumerism, have become so powerful, so seductive, so overwhelming, that it is only too easy to accept their propaganda as invincible truth. With the trend towards the globalized economy those who dominate the corporate culture have brought virtually all the media under their control, and thus to dispel the consumerist mirage is a most formidable challenge indeed. Yet the seeds of this system's own destruction have already

sprung up from within itself: in its growing polarization of the world into the rich and the poor; in its aggressive assault on every obstacle to corporate profit; in its disregard for basic human values; and of most importance today, in its reckless exploitation of the earth's own life-support systems.

Today we stand at a forked road, a road whose branches extend in two different directions. The choice of which road to take will decide our fate—our own personal fate and that of our planet. The road that has brought us to our present impasse is that of untrammelled development guided by a profit-oriented economic system. By extending our understanding of the physical world, science has conferred on us commanding powers over nature, a degree of control that is truly staggering. But the mastery we have won over the external world has been gained at the neglect of mastery over ourselves. To continue in this way, focused exclusively on more external development, is to place our very survival in jeopardy. That this risk is very real can be seen from the Conference on Climate Change in Kyoto (1997): virtually every country that participated, West and East, insisted on the right to pursue the path of unrestricted economic growth, even though this means that in the future the pollution of our air and water will become unbearable and unpredictable climate change may cause large-scale calamities. Indeed, one gets the impression that in their rush to win a share of the good life, people are ready to flirt with the prospect that by their unbridled greed they may rip away the very support systems that make life on earth

possible.

The other road does not involve a rejection of science and technology, but a recognition of their proper place in the scale of human values. Their function is to serve the human community, to alleviate want, and to help provide the material prosperity needed as a basis for the pursuit of other goals—cultural, intellectual, and spiritual development. What we need most urgently today is a shift in emphasis from external development to internal development. To focus upon internal development is not to escape into a private realm of subjective fantasy or to spurn the demands of social responsibility, but to organize our priorities in the way that brings the fullest realization of the human potential at the deepest level. The great spiritual teachers tell us that the goals of human life are governed by a scale of values, and that within this scale the highest value belongs to the highest goal. For Buddhism this is the attainment of enlightenment and liberation, the attainment of Nibbāna, to be won by treading the Noble Eightfold Path.

While the laws of the spiritual life have always held true, what we are being compelled to see today, with a clarity never before so striking, is the inextricable dependence of the external, material dimension of our existence on the internal, psychological dimension. In countless ways the point is being driven home to us that the world we share is a collective reflection of our minds, its social, economic, and political structures the outward projections of our thought patterns and value schemes. For this reason our common

welfare, perhaps even our survival as a species, depends on a large-scale transformation of consciousness. This transformation must cut clear across all boundaries—East and West, North and South—dissolving obstinate attitudes and assumptions that are ultimately self-destructive. If I were to sum up in concise terms the implications that the Buddha's message has for us today, as we slide into the twenty-first century, it would be this: that we must recognize that the wounds that afflict our world are symptoms of the wounds that afflict our minds. Our collective problems, from child prostitution to ecological devastation, from political corruption to corporate imperialism, are warning signs writ large of the destructive distortions in views and values that have sunk so deeply into our hearts. The bright side of the Buddha's message is that human beings can change. They are not held helpless captives of the mind's dark defilements, but by acknowledging their predicament, their suffering and anguish, they can begin the slow hard task of tackling the causes and thereby set about freeing themselves.

Surely such goals as social justice, relief from poverty, an end to communal conflict, and the protection of our natural environment deserve a top place on our agendas. But what the Buddha's teaching leads us to see is that we cannot reasonably expect to resolve these formidable social problems as long as we continue, in our personal lives, to move in the same familiar ruts of greed, carelessness, and selfishness. To heal the wounds of our world we must work

to heal the wounds of our heart, the deep hidden wounds of greed, hatred, and delusion. The message, admittedly, is a difficult one, for inner changes always require greater effort than outer achievements, especially when the first step is self-understanding. In the final analysis, however, it is the only approach that will work, and this certainly makes it worthy of our attention.

I wish to close this paper with some words referring specifically to the condition of Buddhism within Asia. When we look at the way of life gaining ascendancy in Buddhist Asia today, it seems that the true Dhamma is rapidly losing its influence. There may be plenty of temples, gigantic Buddha images looking out on us from the hills and roadways, and monks visible in all the major cities and towns. But a life inspired and guided by the Dhamma, based on moral rectitude, on loving kindness and compassion, on respect and care for others: all this is in alarming decline. To prevent the true Dhamma from disappearing, radical and far-sighted steps will have to be taken.

To keep the Dhamma alive through the coming generations it is most essential to find ways to make the teaching meaningful to the younger generation. Given the way Buddhism is practiced in Asia today, it seems that an educated young person will see in it little more than a system of rites and rituals, useful perhaps as a reminder of one's cultural and ethnic identity, but with very little relevance to our present concerns. The youth are the ones

who will have to see that Buddhism survives into the next generation and that it will be able to offer its rich insights and spiritual practices to the global community. If we lose the youth to materialism and the cult of self-indulgence, we have lost the future of Buddhism, and at best all that will survive will be the outer crust of the religion, not its vital essence.

Success in keeping Buddhism alive requires that the true spiritual core of the Dhamma be extracted from its often constricting and deadening institutional embodiments. Above all, this task demands that the Dhamma be treated not as a basis for ethnic identity or cultural pride but as a living path of spiritual development and personal transformation that touches our most fundamental attitudes, goals, and values. It is only when the Dhamma is appropriated in such a way that it will serve to heal the wounds in our own minds and hearts, and it is only by healing the wounds within that we can face the momentous task of helping to heal the wounds of the world.

A Buddhist Approach to Economic and Social Development



In this paper I will be using the Buddha's teachings as a lens through which to examine the conception of economic and social development prevalent in today's world. If, as I contend, a Buddhist model of development is fundamentally incompatible with the dominant one, it is important to understand the reasons why. Thus I will first examine, from a Buddhist point of view, the model of development currently endorsed by most mainline economists and social analysts. Having shown the flaws in this model, I will then sketch some guideposts towards an alternative program of economic and social development based on Buddhist principles. Since I am not by training an economist and really have little knowledge of this area, my comments will have to be very general, but as long as they are in accordance with the spiritual and ethical principles of the Dhamma even generalities can be helpful.

The notion of economic and social development has today

become the rallying call of politicians, business leaders, and policy planners clear across the globe. This notion thus exercises a tremendous influence on the lives of all human beings, both at the personal level and as a determinant of social policy. Although the Buddhist texts prescribe certain principles to guide human beings in their economic and social activities, the notions of economic and social development that dominate current policy formulation have no precise parallels in earlier epochs. Thus to give adequate treatment to our topic it is not enough merely to listen to the canonical texts. Rather, we must draw out the implications of such ideas as economic and social development in their bearings on present-day social policy. Then we must use the profound perspectives offered us by the Dhamma as a tool for evaluating them and judging their worth.

The goal of economic and social development currently being pursued by most developing nations is governed by a model represented by the West, particularly by the United States. Political leaders and business magnates, both East and West, take it for granted that the Western economic system provides the standard for the rest of the world to follow, offering the panacea for humanity's most persistent social problems—poverty, violence, and injustice. The word “development” implies a scale along which countries can be ranked according to their relative success in fulfilling this ideal. Those countries which successfully implement the ideal are called developed; those which haven't yet made the grade are said to be developing. It is assumed as a

matter of course that all countries are moving along a single track in the same direction, with the West out ahead and the rest of the world struggling to catch up.

The chief characteristic of a developed country in this sense is determined almost exclusively by its economy. A developed country is understood to be one in which the economy is driven by the application of high technology to industrial production and commercial services. The trajectory of development is defined by both vertical and horizontal axes: the vertical axis is innovation in techniques and products, the horizontal axis expansion in production and distribution. In such a society the rest of the social order is subordinated to the economy in such a way as to enable the economy to function with maximum efficiency. The rationalization offered to explain this form of social organization is that an efficient economy, marked by mass-scale production and wide distribution of goods, is the indispensable means for promoting the general welfare. By constantly raising levels of production and distribution, its proponents hold, a super-abundance of wealth will be created which will eventually trickle down to everyone, thus ensuring that everyone gets a share of the cake.

It is on this theoretical foundation that the West has pursued unchecked economic growth since the days of the Industrial Revolution, and it is in awe of the West's enormous technological prowess and material affluence that the rest of the world has chosen to follow its lead. This model has deeply impressed the leaders of Asian countries

throughout the Buddhist world, who seem, almost without exception, committed to developing an economy geared to industrial production and the use of high technology. Thus it is of paramount importance to those responsible for guiding the future of Buddhism in those countries to contemplate this model in its many ramifications.

A detailed examination of this conception of economic and social development would require at least a full-length paper, but in this short presentation I intend to raise two simple questions. First: Is it really feasible for the rest of the world to emulate the Western model? And second: If it is feasible, is it really desirable for us to take this route? The first question is quite independent of a Buddhist point of view, since it involves considerations that do not hinge on any particular religious commitment. The second question, however, brings in a Buddhist perspective and asks whether the Western approach to development is truly compatible with the spirit that animates the Buddha's teaching.

Is It Feasible for All?

The first question can be answered very simply. Not only is it unfeasible for the rest of the world to pursue the road to development taken by the West, but it is virtually impossible for the Western economies (and those of the "newly industrialized countries") to continue along this track much longer without jeopardizing everyone. The pursuit of economic development through high technology and industrialization has brought in its trail consequences

that verge on disaster, threatening to undermine the very support systems on which sentient life depends.

The human economy does not operate in an infinite expanse capable of providing an inexhaustible supply of resources. It operates, rather, in an ecosystem which is closed, finite, and extremely fragile. When the economy expands, it does so by absorbing into itself more and more of the resource base of the ecosystem and by burdening the ecosystem in turn with its waste. The ecosystem imposes a limit of 100%, beyond which nothing more remains for consumption. But long before the human economy reaches that limit, it will cross a threshold point beyond which the delicate fabric of the ecosystem will be damaged so badly it can no longer sustain higher forms of life.

We may already be very close to that threshold; we have no sure way to know in advance, and as natural systems can disintegrate from below very slowly the final catastrophe may not become evident at once. With the human population due to increase by 50% over the next half century, the stress on the environment is bound to rise to even more perilous levels, levels which will be stretched still further by the global pursuit of economic growth. Not only is it reckless and irresponsible for the countries of the Third World to head down the road of expansive industrial production, but our very survival as a species will require that we place unrelenting pressure on the North to drastically cut down on current high levels of production and consumption and adopt new models of economic

organization more conducive to the ecological health of the world.

Is It Desirable At All?

The second question I posed assumes (contrary to actual fact) that the Western model of economic development is ecologically feasible, and asks whether it would still be desirable from a Buddhist point of view. Once we have seen that the model portends ecological disaster, it might seem unnecessary even to raise this question. Such would indeed be the case if human beings were really as rational as they claim to be, but like moths heading towards a flame our leaders and policy planners still seem drawn towards economic growth as the master solution to the weighty social problems pressing so heavily on their lands. Therefore a brief discussion of this question is desirable.

In reply, I would say succinctly that the Western model is not desirable, on the grounds that it has inescapable economic, social, and cultural consequences which, from a Buddhist perspective, are unmistakably pernicious. Let us briefly examine each category in turn.

(a) Economic. The proponents of global capitalism advocate continuous growth as the means to eliminate poverty and ensure general prosperity. The slogan that expresses this bit of conventional wisdom is “the rising tide will lift all boats.” However, after over fifty years of incessant global development, we find the gap between rich and poor wider than ever before and increasing almost in tandem with the

degree of economic growth. The gap has widened both between the rich and poor nations of the world, and also between the rich and poor within most of the world's nations. Over the past half century economic growth has expanded fivefold, international trade twelve fold, and direct foreign investment by 24–36 times. Yet today a higher proportion of the world's population is living below the poverty line than ever before. The population of the North, which makes up 20% of the world total, receives 80% of world income, while the bottom 20% takes in only 1.4%. The combined incomes of the top 20% are 60 times larger than those at the bottom 20%; this is twice as high as in 1950, when they were only 30 times larger. In short, the economic growth of fifty years has not brought the universal benefits promised in such glowing terms. To the contrary, the wealth generated has accrued to a minuscule minority, the corporate and financial elite, while increasing numbers, now in the West as well, sink deeper into insecurity and poverty.

(b) Social. The social consequences of the industrial growth economy are equally grim. A traditional Buddhist society is characterized by a high degree of social cohesion and a strong sense of community, its members linked in a rich web of relationships, from the family on up, that confer a deep sense of personal anchorage. Most people earn their living by subsistence agriculture, craftsmanship, and small-scale trade, occupations which bring them into direct contact with those who purchase and consume their products. Spiritual guidance comes from the Sangha, the

order of monks and nuns, who not only pass on to the lay community the teachings of the Buddha but also stand at the acme of civil society as living examples of the spiritual virtues needed to win the ultimate goal, Nibbāna.

Enter the market economy, beginning from the colonial era, and the complex web of sustaining relationships is twisted into a tangle. Small farms are dismantled in favor of large estates used to grow cash crops for sale on the global market. Small industries are driven into extinction by the arrival of the transnational corporation, artisans rendered superfluous by cheap mass-produced goods, the small retailer driven into bankruptcy by the spread of the supermarket and chain store.

As people are dispossessed of their land and businesses, unemployment soars, and large numbers drift towards the cities, seeking employment in factories and accommodation in the spreading slums. There they toil at tedious tasks for long hours and low wages, sometimes under dangerous conditions. Hit by the blows of the market economy, the close bonds of community are suddenly sundered. The blow can be traumatic. People find themselves adrift in a sea of distrust, as the close personal ties so characteristic of traditional society give way to cold impersonal confrontations between nameless faces in the crowd. Instead of cooperating to promote the common good, people are subtly forced to compete with each other in a brute struggle for subsistence that can be won only by bending others to one's advantage.

Family relations also disintegrate: first the closely knit extended family dissolves into the self-enclosed nuclear family; then the nuclear family in turn splits up, leaving behind broken marriages, lonely adults, and emotionally deprived children. The degrading nature of this social system is clearly evident in the symptoms of decline so prevalent today, both in the North and the South: homelessness, escalating crime, prostitution and child abuse, juvenile delinquency, suicide, pervasive alcoholism and drug addiction.

(c) Cultural. In traditional Buddhist societies concern with the accumulation of wealth and goods is subordinated to the pursuit of ethical and spiritual virtues. The Dhamma, as the peerless guide to thought and action, encourages such qualities as simplicity, contentment, generosity, and self-sacrifice. Wisdom is cherished above mere cleverness, moral purity above wealth and status. But with the rise of the industrial growth society, everything changes, as the drive to acquire, own, and consume turns into a tyrannical master whose demands are implacable.

The need to dissolve the attitudes enjoined by traditional Buddhist culture is inherent in the logic of global capitalism, and it is therefore naive to expect reform to come about simply by giving the giant corporations an injection of Buddhist precepts. The driving engine of the corporate economy is the need to increase profits, and to achieve this objective it must methodically undercut all those traditional values that discourage the acquisitive urge. The corporate

leaders do not have to accomplish this by direct assault, and generally they will espouse moral values. But by subtly manipulating people's perceptions and ways of thinking at deep subliminal levels, the corporate system gradually transforms them into consumers whose lives center around the unconstrained acquisition and enjoyment of technologically produced commodities. The most vulnerable targets are the young, who are encouraged to develop a culture of their own in which popularity and status are determined by what they own, wear, sing, and eat.

The avenues of invasion are manifold. They include television, the cinema, videos, and music, which nurtures the rise of a global monoculture in which all traditional diversity is dissolved. Chain stores and shopping malls make their contribution too, providing the commodities essential to high status. But the most direct agent of attack is the advertising industry, which plants in people's minds the firm conviction that the ruling purpose of their lives is nothing more than to acquire and enjoy, without need for scruples or restraint.

Buddhist Guideposts towards Development

At the present point in history it is difficult to offer a well-designed practical plan for economic and social development that has already proved its worth. Standing at the threshold of the third millennium we are entering a new frontier, where we must work out new solutions to

formidable problems by sheer trial and error. It is clear enough, however, that with the global industrial economy pushing the world towards the brink of catastrophe, we have no choice but to envision viable alternatives, and already, in various quarters, the search for new models is diligently underway. In what follows I will enumerate a few simple guideposts for a Buddhist approach to development.

The first task that Buddhism would have to undertake is to reverse a strange inversion of logic that lies at the heart of the industrial growth model of development. When we view this model in the light of the Buddha's teaching, it is at once obvious that it rests upon an extraordinary degree of abstraction from the concrete reality of lived experience. This abstraction takes place in at least two stages. First, the economy, which in traditional cultures occupies a subordinate place in the social order, is drawn out from its proper bounds and taken as the chief criterion for judging societal well-being. Then, as if this were not enough, the health of the economy is conceived exclusively in quantitative terms, by means of such indicators as the GNP or the GDP. These indicators measure only a country's total exchange of monetary goods and services. They reveal nothing at all about the qualitative nature of the goods and services exchanged; they do not register the social and ecological costs of economic development; they say nothing about how the wealth generated is distributed among a country's population. Yet a myopic fixation on bolstering GDP captivates the attention of policy planners everywhere,

guiding the formulation of economic and social policy in virtually every country on Earth. This narrowness of vision encourages a double parasitism, whereby the economy becomes a parasite on the social order and both combined gnaw away at the planet's delicate ecosystem.

The Four Noble Truths of the Buddha provide us with a powerful instrument for diagnosing the causes and results of this distortion of vision. The cause is ignorance, not seeing things as they really are, which provides a field for craving to emerge and bring entire societies under its dominion. When there is craving, as we know from the Four Truths, suffering is bound to follow, and this is amply confirmed when we survey the debris left behind by the global race towards development.

The fundamental concept that must underlie any Buddhist approach to economic and social development is "Dhamma," the natural, self-subsistent law of righteousness and truth realized by the Buddha through his enlightenment and communicated by his teaching. The primacy of Dhamma means that economic and social policy must be guided from start to finish by ethical norms. These norms are not mere matters of subjective judgement, personal and relative, but real and immutable laws written into the very fabric of being. This does not imply that there is one invariable form of social and economic organization valid for all people under all conditions. A wide range of alternatives are possible, as diverse as natural landscapes, but for any such system to conduce to real human welfare it

must be grounded on sound ethical principles which encourage people to strive for moral integrity in their lives. A social system which runs counter to the Dhamma, which encourages or condones unethical behavior, is bound to bring widespread misery and destitution, not only for human beings but for the entire natural order. We can see concrete proof of this in present-day corporate capitalism. Founded on the idea that selfishness, greed, and unrestrained consumption are the keys to progress, the whole juggernaut drives us steadily towards global catastrophe.

From the centrality of Dhamma to social order two subsidiary principles follow, one especially relevant to the economic sphere, the other to the social sphere. The principle that should govern the economic sphere is “the rule of sufficiency,” which means simply knowing that enough is enough. The rule of sufficiency is both a policy of mental hygiene contributing to psychological balance and a policy of ecological wisdom contributing to the preservation of the natural environment. In both respects the rule promotes a sound economy in the literal meaning of the word: “home management,” the judicious ordering of our internal home of mind and of our external home, the natural world.

As a discipline of mental hygiene, the rule of sufficiency rests on the insight that human needs are hierarchical—as I will shortly explain—and that there is a point of satiation in meeting material needs beyond which continued

gratification becomes deleterious. This does not imply that we must all adopt ascetic lifestyles and deny ourselves even the innocent pleasures of life. But it does mean that when people seek to acquire possessions and enjoy sensual pleasures beyond their natural capacities, they do so at the expense of other needs, social and spiritual, which are equally crucial to their fulfillment. Thereby they violate a law of human nature and bring harm to themselves and to those victimized by their avarice.

As a policy of ecological wisdom, the rule of sufficiency teaches us that there are inherent limits to economic growth dictated by the insurmountable finitude of the ecosystem. Pursued beyond these limits, economic expansion becomes parasitic both on human health, physical and mental, and on the regenerative capacities of nature. When applied to our present-day situation, this principle teaches us that economic development, in the sense of continuously expanding production and obsessive technological innovation, is precisely what we don't need. Our economy is big enough already, far too big, and our technologies too smart, too powerful, and too much fraught with moral risk for beings as fallible as ourselves. What we need most of all is streamlining and downsizing: cutting down on weapons production, on industries dedicated to wasteful luxuries, on conspicuous consumption as the engine that drives the economy. Instead we need qualitative improvements to make our technologies more humble and humane, more benign towards the total biosphere. And above all we need

greater stress on economic justice and social equity, so that no one need be deprived of a fair standard of living.

The principle that should guide social activity is the rule of cooperation and harmony. But cooperation must be infused and animated by ethical motivation. The cooperation between super-powers to dominate the global political order in their own selfish interests is not the kind of cooperation we require; the mergers, corporate takeovers, and business cartels formed to control the world economy is not the kind of cooperation that accords with the Dhamma. Our current social order promotes competition rather than cooperation; the key word bandied about today is competitiveness. Such an emphasis is bound to generate conflict and resentment, splintering the social system into a multitude of hostile factions. A society founded upon the Dhamma recognizes that each person should aim to promote the good of the greater unit to which he or she belongs, and as a minimum should never seek private fulfillment in ways that inflict harm on others. The ideal is beautifully summed up in the “six principles of harmony and respect” taught by the Buddha to the Sangha: loving kindness in thought, word, and deed; sharing righteous gains; observing a common code of morality; and holding in common liberating views.

In a Buddhist approach to social and economic development, the primary criterion that would govern policy formulation should be the well-being of a society’s members, and this well-being should be viewed holistically,

taking account of a wide range of factors. The economy would be assigned to the place where it belongs, as a subordinate domain nested within the wider social system; in turn the social system would be viewed as an integral part of the total ecosystem, the indispensable foundation for all life. Thus economic development would be guided along lines that promote the health and well-being of the social order without harming the natural systems within which human society is lodged. To the contrary, a Buddhist social policy would recognize the importance of preserving the natural environment, not simply to provide a continued supply of resources for the human economy, but as a positive good both intrinsically and in relation to the aesthetic enrichment and psychological wholeness of its members.

Society in turn must be recognized as an abstraction from the individual human beings who make up the social order. Thus, when we speak of improving the well-being of society, this ultimately means that social policy must seek to promote the welfare of individual people. How we set about promoting the welfare of people is contingent on our view of human nature. If we hold a materialistic view of human nature, then our efforts will be directed primarily to ensuring that their material needs are met, and we will see no reason to give attention to other factors. If, however, we hold a more spiritual conception of human nature, then we will recognize that other needs beyond material prosperity also call out for fulfillment.

The Buddha's teachings offer a wide-ranging conception of the human person as a complex entity having a diversity of needs which all must be met to ensure happiness and well-being. These needs fall into a well-defined hierarchy of importance, which we might here consider as threefold. At the base of the hierarchy is the physical need for the basic requisites of existence: clothing, food, a comfortable dwelling, medical care, transportation, energy, tools, and so forth. At the next level are social needs: for education, family, friendship and personal intimacy, participation in a community, and meaningful work. At the highest level are spiritual needs: for moral rectitude, mental development, and wise understanding of the true nature of life.

A social order guided by Buddhist principles would create opportunities for all these needs to be satisfied and would see that no one is frustrated in their aspirations to lead a contented life. A Buddhist social order would begin by ensuring that all members of society are able to satisfy their material needs. But because the Buddhist teaching views needs hierarchically, it does not encourage the narrow fixation on material acquisition and sensual gratification so characteristic of contemporary culture. By pointing out that the crass pursuit of luxury and abundance is a root-cause of suffering, Buddhism encourages restraint, simplicity, and contentment. By extolling generosity as a basic virtue and the mark of a superior person, it promotes a wide distribution of basic necessities so that no one has to suffer deprivation.

For Buddhism, however, material satisfaction merely provides a starting point for the pursuit of higher goals. Since human beings are social creatures who naturally come together for common ends, this means that a social order guided by Buddhist principles would consist primarily of small-scale communities in which each member can make an effective contribution. Only small-scale social arrangements can rescue people from the ominous abyss of meaninglessness so pervasive in modern urban life. From a Buddhist perspective, the vast polluted mega-cities and impersonal bureaucracies characteristic of our era would have to be considered deviations from the natural order conducive to true human well-being. They are a travesty of our inherent need for communal participation. The local communities consonant with Buddhist principles would focus on the extended family as the primary unit of social integration. The family would be guided by Buddhist views and values, which they will serve to transmit from one generation to the next. The model for the entire web of social relationships would be that provided in the magnificent Sigālovāda Sutta (Dīgha Nikāya No. 31), where the Buddha minutely defines the reciprocal duties of parents and children, husband and wife, employer and employee, friend and friend, teacher and students, monks and laity.

The economy most compatible with such a mode of social organization would be small-scale and localized, using simple technology which does not drain natural resources.

In such an economy production would be aimed principally at local consumption, so that there would be direct face-to-face contact between producers and consumers. Modalities would have to be worked out to bring about integration of the small local economies into a broader national and global economy, but the driving engine of the entire system would be the promotion of well-being both material and social, not commercial profit and unrestrained expansion.

But even a prosperous economy and a harmonious social order cannot satisfy the deepest need of the human heart: the need for meaning, for an ultimate purpose around which our lives should revolve and a path of conduct to guide us through the thickets of difficult decisions. This need can only be met by religion: religion not as a bond reinforcing a sense of communal identity, not as a legacy of traditional rituals and beliefs, but as a genuine path of self-transformation opening upon a transcendent reality. Since in the ontological order it is this reality which claims the highest place, it follows that in the hierarchy of values it is spiritual values that should claim our deepest respect.

Genuine spiritual values do not exist in a self-enclosed domain of their own cut off from the rest of life. Rather, they spill forth and pervade all other aspects of our existence, sustaining them in a unifying vision and steering them in the direction of the highest good. Thus in a sound and healthy social order spiritual vision will guide the formulation of economic and social policy, ensuring that the latter do not stop short at mundane ends but aim beyond

themselves towards the dimension of transcendence. In a predominantly Buddhist society, the highest good is Nibbāna, and economic and social life would be seen as offering the opportunity for making progress towards Nibbāna. Though the final goal may be accessible only to those who embark on the austere road of renunciation, the Buddhist path reaches down into the mire of everyday life and spells out, with clarity and precision, the steps needed to advance in the direction of the final goal. Thus in a Buddhist social order the ceaseless struggle for mundane subsistence would be considered, not as a mere series of technical problems in need of a technological fix, but as an opportunity for cultivating the virtues of mind and heart that lead to the highest. This gives us the ultimate meaning of development for a Buddhist society: the development of morality, concentration, and wisdom culminating in full enlightenment and liberation from suffering.

A true Buddhist social order would try to make this prospect available to its members by nurturing a Sangha, a community of renunciant monks and nuns, and providing for their material needs. These renunciants in turn would guide the broader community in the Buddha's teaching and provide them with the inspiring example of those who have withdrawn from the cycle of production and consumption to devote themselves to a holy life.

One last word is called for. It may seem that I have just

sketched a plan that is beautiful and compelling on paper, but utterly idealistic and impracticable in fact. In part I agree. To implement such a model will be extremely difficult, awakening staunch resistance from mighty sectors with immense wealth and power. But we have to recognize that in a world moving steadily to universal democracy the final say in determining the forms of social organization under which we live must rest with people, with you and me. When a system assumes forms which bring extravagant benefits to a few and great misery and deprivation to many, there is no cogent reason for it to continue. All that sustains it is the naked ambitions of the elite at its helm, and the web of deceit they weave to hide the truth from ordinary people. Today this web of deception is dissolving on many fronts: in ecological disasters, in increasing unemployment and economic injustice, in the waves of crime, exploitation, and social degeneration so visible everywhere, especially in the Third World, where most of the world's population lives. Large numbers of people, who have seen through the mirage of technological progress and global capitalism, realize that this system is unsustainable, indeed that it is ultimately harmful for its beneficiaries as much as for its manifest victims. In many quarters—grass-roots organizations, counter-culture movements, and alternative think-tanks—the search is on for a way to preserve this planet in the new century. To such people Buddhism offers a message which is at once lofty and sublime yet capable of addressing in lucid terms the hard realities of social and

economic life. It is the responsibility of the Buddhist community to sound that message, in its spiritual heights and earthly applications, for the benefit of all living beings.

The Changing Face of Buddhism



On those rare occasions when I visit an urban Buddhist temple here in Sri Lanka, I am repeatedly struck by the stark observation that almost all the devotees present are middle aged or elderly people, perhaps accompanied by their grandchildren. In the viharas of our towns and cities young people, and even adults in the prime of life, are most conspicuous by their absence. For a country where seventy percent of the population is counted as Buddhist, such an uneven turnout at religious functions is ominous. For Buddhism to continue from one generation to the next, the flame of religious faith must be transmitted across the gap of generations. If, however, it is indeed these invisible young people who hold the future of the Sāsana in their hands, then that future does not seem very bright. Their absence is perhaps a warning that the message of the Dhamma is not hitting home, that its representatives are failing to translate its principles into a language that speaks to those most in need of its guidance. Should this trend continue, in a few more generations Buddhism may become just a relic of Sri Lanka's ancient heritage: beautiful to look

upon but as lifeless as the ruins at Anuradhapura.

Outwardly, symbols of Sri Lanka's Buddhist legacy can be seen everywhere in this land. Monks still play prominent roles at public functions; gigantic Buddha images stare down at us from the hilltops; in most towns a steady stream of pirit chanting blares out twice daily from the loudspeakers. Paradoxically, however, these outward emblems of Buddhist piety coexist in an uneasy tension with a malignant spiritual disease whose symptoms have spread across all strata of Sri Lankan society. A bitter internecine war drags on interminably, with a brutalizing impact on the whole country. Strikes are commonplace in our essential services, holding the poor and helpless hostage. Murder, theft, rape, drug-trafficking, the sexual exploitation of children—all have become so widespread that even the most gruesome criminal act barely pricks our sense of moral outrage. Alcohol, drug use, and suicide are the most common escape routes, especially for the poor, but their popularity is hardly a sign that Buddhism is thriving.

If Buddhism is failing to penetrate deep into the hearts of those who profess it as their faith, we have to ask ourselves why, and to ask what can be done to reverse present trends. I would like to approach these questions by first asking what role Buddhism is intended to play in our lives in the first place. I will deal with this question by distinguishing two aspects of Buddhism both stemming from the Buddha's original teaching. I shall call these the liberative and the accommodative strands of the Dhamma.

The liberative strand, the essential and unique discovery of the Buddha, is the message of a direct way to liberation from suffering. This strand begins with the realization that suffering originates within ourselves, from our own greed, hatred, and ignorance, above all from our drive to establish a sense of separate selfhood that pits us against all other living forms. The Buddha's radical solution to the problem of suffering is the demolition of the self-delusion in its entirety. This issues in an utterly new mode of being that the Buddha called "Nibbāna," the extinguishing of the fire of lust, the going out of the ego-consciousness with its flames of selfish craving.

The attainment of this goal, however, requires a price far higher than most people can pay: a strict discipline of contemplation grounded upon a radical ethic of restraint. Thus, being a skillful teacher, the Buddha modulated his teaching by including another dimension suitable for those unable to walk the steep road of renunciation. This is the accommodative strand of the Dhamma: a path of gradual transformation, extending over many lives, fulfilled by training in meritorious deeds and developing the virtues needed as a foundation for the ultimate attainment of Nibbāna. This strand of Dhamma, it must be emphasized, is not merely an expedient device, a beautiful fable invented by the Buddha as a means of offering consolation or of inculcating moral virtues. It is, rather, an integral aspect of the original teaching stemming from the Buddha's own vision into the multiple dimensions of sentient existence

and the prospects for transmigration within the round of rebirths. But the function of this teaching within his system of training is provisional rather than ultimate, mundane rather than transcendent.

I call this dimension of Buddhism “accommodative” for two reasons: first, because it accommodates the doctrine of deliverance to the capacities and needs of those unable to follow the austere path of meditation prescribed as the direct route to Nibbāna; and second because it helps to accommodate Buddhist followers within saṃsāra while offering salutary guidance to protect them from the more intense forms of worldly suffering, especially from a fall into lower spheres of rebirth. In its accommodative dimension, Buddhism provides a comprehensive worldview which gives ordinary men and women a meaningful picture of their place in the cosmos. At the same time it propounds an elevated system of values that includes ethical rules to help us live happily amidst the fluctuations of daily life and in harmony with our fellow human beings.

Although the original keynote of the Dhamma was the message of deliverance, as Buddhism spread first across India and later over wider Asia, the balance between its two strands swung away from the liberative towards the accommodative. Such a development was only natural when a spiritual teaching whose liberative core was suited for renunciants became the religion of an entire nation, as happened in Sri Lanka and elsewhere in Asia. But this

aspect of Buddhism should not be disparaged or placed in competitive contrast to the liberative dimension, for both are equally essential to the aims of the Buddha's teachings. The path of renunciation leading to final liberation was always suited for the few, even within the ranks of the monastic order; for the many the accommodative strand of Buddhism was necessary, both as a worldview and as a means of preparing the ground for practice of the liberative Dhamma.

Through the centuries accommodative Buddhism portrayed for us an orderly universe with the Buddha as the supreme teacher, with multiple heavens inhabited by benevolent gods, governed by an ethical law connecting our present actions with our future destinies. By means of its doctrine of merit, this side of Buddhism gave people an incentive for doing good deeds, and the fruits of this were evident in the general spirit of benevolence that prevailed in traditional Buddhist societies.

From ancient times until the modern era, the picture of the universe offered by accommodative Buddhism functioned as the unchallenged bedrock for the preaching and practice of the Dhamma. However, beginning in the late fifteenth century, from beyond the horizon a challenge came that was to shatter the self-assured certainty of this worldview. The challenge took the shape of the European colonial powers who, in successive waves, grabbed control of the social and political institutions on which popular Buddhism depended. Foreign conquest, the proselytizing missions of

the Christian churches, the secularization of education and its subordination to colonial rule: all these measures together dealt a hard blow to Buddhist self-esteem and to the sovereign role of the Dhamma in the lives of the wider Buddhist population.

This trend was reinforced by the rise of the scientific world-view. Although the basic principles of the scientific method could easily resonate with the Buddhist spirit of free inquiry, science introduced an understanding of the world that, in its materialistic biases, clashed with the spiritual vistas envisaged by Buddhist tradition. While classical Buddhism posits a multi-tiered universe inhabited by many classes of sentient beings who transmigrate from realm to realm in accordance with their karma, scientific naturalism holds that life is a purely physical process which utterly terminates at death, with no survival of personal identity in any form beyond bodily death. While Buddhist thought sees mind as primary and matter as subordinate to mind, naturalism sees matter as fundamental and mind as derivative, a by-product or aspect of material processes. While Buddhism posits a transcendent goal, a supramundane reality to be won by moral and spiritual training, naturalism sees nothing beyond the empirical world and regards all ethical and religious codes as of purely human origin. In the West too the rise of science, in conjunction with an insistent demand for intellectual and moral freedom, worked to dislodge Christianity from its dominant place in the Western mindset.

It was not, however, merely the theoretical power of modern science that threatened the traditional Buddhist worldview and its attendant scheme of values. In fact, in the early twentieth century Buddhist thinkers could enroll science as an ally in their struggle against Christian triumphalism. But what has turned the tables on traditional Buddhist values has not been theory but praxis: the harnessing of technology by a free-market economic system in quest of expanding profits.

This marriage between technology and the free market has given birth to a ravenous consumerist culture grounded on the premise that material affluence and sensual enjoyment are the only worthwhile goals in life. At the present time it is perhaps this culture of consumerism, stimulated by advertising and the popular media, that poses the single biggest challenge to spirituality as an effective force in people's lives. In the cities this culture enfolds the affluent elite in clouds of hedonistic self-indulgence. For the urban and rural poor—awed by its splendors as presented by television, radio, and cinema—it breeds envy, resentment, and despair. Under such circumstances, is there any cause for wonder that alcoholism, drug addiction, suicide, and violent crime have escalated so sharply?

This clash of worldviews and value systems also explains why the Buddhism of the temples has become so peripheral to our younger generation. In temple Buddhism today, the language in which the teaching is couched—the ambience, the flavor, the whole tenor of the teaching—is one rooted in

the worldview of medieval accommodative Buddhism. This may be lovely, ennobling, and even true in its own way, but it is hardly able to deliver the message of the Dhamma to those nurtured on the ways of modernity. The teachings of temple Buddhism stem from a culture irretrievably gone, from an era where roles were clearly defined and everything had its place in an intelligible, friendly whole. But we live, breathe, and wend our way along the streets of the modern world, where changes take place at blinding speed, where a host of aggressive voices compete for our attention, where every cozy assumption is exposed to merciless questioning. For those struggling to find a niche for themselves in such a world, the self-assured Buddhism of the temples has ceased to be “the Dhamma,” the message of awakening that blows open our minds and floods them with light. Instead it has become just a quaint reminder of the past, still capable of evoking occasional moods of piety, but barely relevant to the difficult choices we face amidst the grind of daily life.

One approach to this clash of worldviews is to retreat defensively into the past, to try to seal off our ancient cultural and religious heritage from the depredations of modernity, and to extol the superiority of Buddhism to everything modern. This is the fundamentalist stance, not necessarily an aggressive stance, but one which chooses nostalgic retreat to the past over innovative adjustment to the present. From this perspective the arrival of modern culture poses an intrinsic threat to the Dhamma, and the

only way to protect the precious teaching is by rejecting modernity and attempting to preserve the heritage of tradition with minimal change.

However, for any organism to survive it must adapt to changes in the environment. To reject the new environment and struggle to preserve the past is to risk petrification: to turn Buddhism into an outdated antique whose relevance has vanished and which remains only as a stimulus for feelings of devotional piety. This has been the attitude in more traditionalist Buddhist circles. Its stubborn conservatism, which weds the spiritual vistas of the Dhamma to a particular culture and social order, partly accounts for the withering relevance of Buddhism in the eyes of many in the younger generations.

Yet retreat into the past is not the only way to preserve the Dhamma from destruction. Indeed, such regressive pietism preserves only the shell, the outer forms of Buddhism, while nullifying its inner vitality. Another approach, a more optimistic one, is available to us, one which does not jump to the conclusion that the arrival of modernity will necessarily sound the death knoll of the Dhamma. Looked at from this angle, the current crisis of Buddhist culture might be seen as a means of purgation, helping us to separate the chaff from the kernel and rediscover what is truly timeless in the Buddha's message. This means that a new emphasis is required, one which might be described as a turn from the overemphasis on the accommodative dimension of Buddhism to the liberative.

When I speak about this shift in emphasis, I do not intend to say that the traditional Buddhist worldview is wrong and must be jettisoned in favor of the purely naturalistic outlook proposed by modern science. In fact, allowing for inevitable mythological elements in Buddhist tradition, I would maintain that the Buddhist worldview, with its recognition of the crucial role of the mind and the inconceivably vast dimensions of reality, is much richer and more adequate to philosophical reflection than the flattened worldview bequeathed to us through a presumptuous misapplication of the scientific method beyond its legitimate domain. In any case, one impressive feature of the Buddha's teaching is the independence of its liberative core from any particular cosmology, its ability to speak directly to our most fundamental concerns in a way that is immediately and personally verifiable no matter what cosmology one adopts. In terms of our present situation, material progress, the fulfillment of the consumerist dream, forces us to recognize that affluence does not bring real happiness but only leaves us empty, thirsting for some deeper fulfillment. Thereby we are brought to see the hard truth, enshrined in the liberative Dhamma, that craving is the cause of suffering. We can also see that release from suffering can never be won by yielding to the incessant implorations of craving, but only by mastering our minds through methodical training aimed at self-knowledge and self-transformation.

While it is difficult to predict the directions that institutional Buddhism will take in the coming decades, we can discern

at work today several important trends which may actually herald a true revival of the Dhamma. One is disenchantment with the supposed blessings of consumerism. The realization that happiness cannot be bought in the shopping mall should awaken in us an urgent desire to find a more genuine sense of meaning for our lives, a peace and happiness that does not depend on outer conditions. We see signs of this already in the increasing number of lay Buddhists willing to take up the hard work of meditation, traditionally considered the preserve of the monks. For such people, the practice of Buddhism is not so much a matter of conventional rituals as an inward training to be pursued privately or in small groups with like-minded friends.

The impact of materialism thus sends us back to the original liberative strand of the Dhamma, for centuries submerged beneath the accommodationist dimension. But while the older message spoke of the goal mainly as release from the round of rebirths, the stress required today should be on the benefits of Dhamma practice visible here and now: on the happiness and fulfillment won through greater self-knowledge and mastery of the mind. This, of course, is not intended to question the veracity of the doctrine of rebirth and the conception of the goal as ultimate release from *saṃsāra*, but only to insist that for this ultimate goal to become meaningful and relevant to us we must first put our everyday lives in order through self-understanding and self-mastery. Otherwise it is likely to remain the utopian

fantasy that it is within much of present-day accommodative Buddhism.

However, the quest for personal peace of mind does not exhaust the promise of the Dhamma in the epoch that lies ahead. For we live at a decisive moment in history when the future of humankind, and even of our planet as a biological entity, hangs in a delicate balance. Our instantaneous media of communication and rapid means of transportation have welded people everywhere into a single family in which each member is to some degree responsible for the welfare of the whole, not only of all human beings but of the entire community of life. But while our technologies have given us the capacity to provide a decent living to everyone, grave problems of enormous scope remain. Poverty, war, hunger, exploitation, and injustice still cast their shadows over our future, claiming too many victims who cannot even voice their grievances, let alone set them right.

These problems—political, economic, social, and ecological—cry out for solutions, and one of the major tasks faced by every major religion today is to serve as the voice of humanity's conscience. To regard these problems as merely temporary snags that can easily be resolved by political and social reform is to miss the point that what underlies them all, in different ways, is a blind and stubborn selfishness pernicious in its consequences. It is precisely the role of religion, in its innermost essence, to address and rectify this malignancy. Too often in the past religion has been an inflammatory force creating divisions rather than unity, and

this trend can still be seen today in the various kinds of religious fundamentalism rippling across the globe. But all the great spiritual traditions contain at their core a perception of humanity's unity, to be translated into a life guided by love and compassion. It is this side of religion, and not the divisive, that must be fostered in the immediate future.

One of the primary tasks facing Buddhism in the global world of the future is to develop a comprehensive vision of solutions to the social, economic, and political problems that loom so large today. This is not a matter of blending religion and politics, but of making an acute diagnosis of the destructive fixations of consciousness from which these problems spring. The diagnosis must lay bare how human defilements—the same greed, hatred, and ignorance responsible for private suffering—take on a collective dimension embedded in social structures. What is necessary is not only to expose the oppressive, detrimental nature of such structures, but to envisage and strive for new alternatives: fresh perspectives on social organization and human relatedness that can ensure political, economic, and social justice, the preservation of the natural environment, and the actualization of our spiritual potential.

Although such a project, on so vast a scale, will be a new challenge to Buddhism, it is a challenge that can be partly met with the Buddha's insights into the origination of suffering and the means to its resolution. But only partly, for creative thought is needed to apply these insights to

today's unique problems. This means in effect expanding the liberative dimension of the Dhamma by giving it a collective or even global application. In this enterprise, Buddhists must join hands with leaders of other religions committed to the same goal. Beneath their inevitable differences, the great religions concur in seeing our grave social and communal problems as stemming from a primordial blindness rooted in the delusion of self, either personal or blown up into ethnic and nationalistic identities.

From the perspective of the great spiritual traditions, what we must do to redeem ourselves and preserve humanity's place on earth is to abandon our obsession with narrow selfish goals and re-align ourselves with the fundamental law of the universe, with the timeless Dhamma. The Buddha teaches that we can only achieve our own true good when we transcend the standpoint of self and set our hearts on the welfare of all. This principle is not the preserve of any particular religion but can be understood by anyone of good will. What Buddhism gives us is a clear-cut path to master ourselves and to bring forth the wisdom and compassion so sorely needed as we enter the new millennium.

Sangha at the Crossroads



There can be little doubt that in Sri Lanka today Buddhism finds itself at a crossroads, its future increasingly in question. The challenge it faces is not one of numbers and power, but of relevance. Not that the Dhamma itself, the Buddha's teaching, has lost its relevance; for neither the shifting drama of history nor the undulating waves of culture can muffle the timeless message embedded in the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. The problem lies not with the teaching itself, but with those responsible for bringing the teaching to life. What is lacking above all is a combination of skills that can be summed up in three simple words: comprehension, commitment, and translation. Comprehension: a clear understanding of how the teaching applies to the hard realities of human life today, to a society and world in which the old certainties of the past are being scattered like leaves before a storm. Commitment: the willingness to apply the teachings in the way they were intended, even when this means defying the encrustations of established tradition. Translation: not stereotyped "sermons," not sweet consolation, not religious lullabies, but solid, sober explanations of how the timeless principles of the Dhamma

can resolve the distinctive problems and quandries of our age.

As we stand at this crossroads looking towards the future, three choices offer themselves to us. One is simply to resign ourselves to the decay of the Sāsana, accepting it as a backward swing of the pendulum of history—sad but inevitable. A second is to wring our hands and complain, shifting the responsibility to others—the government, the monks, or the minorities. A third is to ask ourselves what we can do to stem the rising tide. If we adopt the third route we might begin by noting that the Sāsana does not exist in an ideal realm of its own, but only as embodied in the millions of people who call themselves Buddhists and look for refuge to the Triple Gem.

This statement might sound obvious, even trite. However, if we reflect for a few moments we will see that, though obvious, it has enormous implications, for it means that we ourselves are ultimately responsible for the prosperity and decline of the Sāsana: our own views, attitudes, and conduct decide whether the Sāsana is to thrive or wither. To recognize this is to see that the welfare of the Sāsana ultimately rests on our own shoulders, not on some state ministry or ecclesiastical council. Just as the health of the body depends on the vitality of its cells, so the strength of the Sāsana ultimately devolves on ourselves, the cells in the living organism of Buddhism.

In this article I want to focus on one particular constituency

of Buddhists in present day Sri Lanka, the Bhikkhu Sangha, the Order of Monks. I intend to examine, though briefly, the problems it faces and its prospects for the future. This task is especially critical because of the central role the Sangha plays in guiding the destiny of the Sāsana, and it is clear that if the Sangha does not learn to deal with the momentous forces inundating present-day society, the future will see it increasingly relegated to the sidelines.

Buddhist tradition meticulously defines the mutual duties of Sangha and laity and these roles form the warp and woof of the Sāsana. The monks are to uphold the teaching by study, practice, preaching, and moral example; the lay people, to support the monks by offering them the four requisites of robes, food, lodging, and medicines. This intimate relationship between the two communities has provided a stable basis for the persistence of the Sāsana through the centuries. Despite the fluctuations of Buddhist history in Sri Lanka, which at times had sunk so low that even a proper Sangha could not be found, whenever Buddhism thrived the relationship between the monastic order and the laity has been its lifeblood. This relationship of mutual assistance, however, found its supporting matrix in a stable agrarian society with clearly defined social roles and a lifestyle governed by common religious and ethical norms. That is precisely what has altered so radically today. A global culture, driven by exponential technological innovation and a relentless free-market economy, has made its presence felt in every corner of this land, challenging

every obstacle to its dominance. In consequence, the entire social order has been shaken by upheavals that reach from the halls of economic and political power right through to the most remote villages and temples.

This modernistic onslaught does not limit itself to mere external triumphs but reaches through to the most private places in our lives: our values, worldviews, and even our sense of personal identity. The result, for the ordinary Buddhist, has been a profound disorientation, a feeling of being stranded in a strange landscape where the old familiar reference points no longer hold. Looking back, we see a past of comfortable certainties that we can never recapture; looking ahead, a future that looks increasingly unpredictable. But amidst the confusion of the present, the Dhamma still appears as a stable reference point that can provide clear answers to our pressing questions and relief from existential stress.

This brings us right to the crux of our problem: the problem of relevance, of conveying the timeless message of the teaching in a language that can address the difficult, unique, complex problems we face navigating our way through the postmodern world. The most critical challenge facing the Sāsana today is that of surviving in this “new world order,” and not merely of surviving institutionally, in name and form, but of contributing to the recovery of universal human values, of helping countless men and women find a way beyond the intellectual and moral abyss. It is precisely here that the role of the Sangha becomes so vitally

important, for it is the monks (and, I dare say, the nuns as well) who should be capable of offering a convincing refuge to “a world gone mad”—a vision of basic sanity, selfless goodness, and serenity amidst the storms of greed, conflict, and violence. Yet it is just on this point that we face a gaping chasm: namely, that the Sangha today seems hardly equipped to respond to such a challenge.

What is needed most urgently, in my view, is not a reinforcement of Buddhist religious identity or a governmental policy that gives “pride of place to Buddhism.” Nor will the construction of more Buddha images and the daily broadcasting of pirit chanting over the loudspeakers give the Sāsana the infusion of fresh blood it so badly needs. What is required are monks and nuns of intelligence, insight, and sensitivity who can demonstrate, by their lives and characters, the spiritually ennobling and elevating power of the Dhamma. To produce monastics of such caliber is not easy, yet such a task cannot be left to chance. It will require, above all, deep-rooted changes in the entire system of monastic recruitment and education, and thus will call for serious thought and careful planning on the part of the Sangha elders. The task is not one to be taken at all lightly; for one can say, in all truth, that nothing less is at stake than the future of Buddhism in this country.

Just as the Sri Lankan government has recently reviewed the whole system of secular education in this country with the aim of reforming educational policy, a similar reformation will have to be introduced right at the heart of the Sangha. If

one compares the system of instruction in the Buddhist monasteries with the curriculum of the Christian seminaries, the disparity is striking. In the seminaries the future priests and nuns are trained, not only in Latin, theology, and scripture, but in all the fields of modern knowledge they will need to play a leading role in today's world, including the critical and comparative study of religion. In the *pirivenas* or Buddhist monastic schools, so far as I can see, the young monks (never nuns!) are trained to become village priests capable of preserving a religious culture not very different from that of the sixteenth century. One can see the bizarre result when a monk educated in the *pirivena* system has to give a sermon to an audience that might include an astrophysicist, a psychiatrist, several computer analysts, and even some lay Buddhist scholars trained in the methods of critical scholarship. Is it any wonder that the listeners pass the time glancing idly at the ceiling or casting weary smiles at each other?

In what follows I will merely throw out a few random suggestions. A systematic program would have to be worked out by those more directly involved in Sangha administration and the training of monks and nuns. I will speak about monks rather than nuns, since I am more familiar with their lifestyles and training. But corresponding changes should also be considered for the nuns, whose status, education, and functions require drastic upgrading if Buddhism is to present a respectable face to a world moving rapidly towards complete gender equality.

For the monks, radical change might be needed at the very beginning, in the system of recruitment. The method of recruitment that currently prevails in the Sangha is the induction of young boys who are far from mature enough to make their own decisions. Often they are “offered” to the Sangha by their parents, as a way for the parents to earn merit. If the parents would sacrifice a youth who seems temperamentally inclined to the religious life, the ultimate effect such a system has on the Sāsana might be a positive one. Indeed, in the past it was usually “the best and the brightest” who would be given to the monastery. Today, however, the child selected is too often the one who appears unlikely to succeed in worldly life: the mischiefmaker, the maverick, the dullard.

I am aware that this system of childhood ordination is deeply entrenched in Sri Lankan Buddhist culture, and I would not propose abolishing it. Despite its faults, the system does have its positive points. For one thing, it enables the youngster to enter the path of renunciation before he has been exposed to the temptations of worldly life; thus from an early age it helps promote the inner purity and detachment needed to withstand the rigors of the monastic training. Another advantage is that it gives the young monk the opportunity to study the Dhamma and the textual languages (Pali and Sanskrit) while the mind is as yet fresh, open, receptive, and retentive. Thereby it conduces to the wide erudition which is one of the traditional hallmarks of the cultured monk.

However, while I would not go so far as to suggest abolishing adolescent recruitment, I do think the Sangha could vastly improve its ranks by imposing more stringent criteria for admission. One measure that might be adopted at once is a longer probationary period before granting the novice ordination. For example, it might be made mandatory for boys intent on being ordained to live at training centers as lay postulants for a minimum of two or three years before they are considered eligible for novice ordination. This would give the Sangha elders an opportunity to observe them more closely, in a wide variety of situations, and to screen out those who seem unsuitable for the monk's life. If this is not practicable, then some other selective procedure might be applied. Whatever method is chosen, the standards of selection should be fairly rigorous—though not inhumane—and the elders should not hesitate to turn away unfit applicants. For one thing has become too painfully obvious to all concerned Buddhists alike, and also to non-Buddhists (both residents of Sri Lanka and foreigners) who judge the Dhamma by the conduct of its followers: far too many youngsters are being draped in saffron robes who do not deserve to wear them. Such misfits only sully the good name of the Sangha and of Buddhism itself.

More rigorous screening of candidates for ordination is, however, only a preliminary measure aimed at sealing off the Sangha from those unsuited for the monkhood. What is equally essential is to offer those who do get ordained

training programs that will promote their wholesome, balanced development. This is truly a critical step, for if youngsters with the potential for the monk's life fail to receive proper training they won't find fulfillment in the monastery, and if they don't find fulfillment their future as monks will be in jeopardy. They will either become disillusioned with the Sangha and return to lay life; or else, from fear of the social stigma attached to disrobing, they may continue as monks in a perpetual state of frustration and discontent. This may explain why we see so many younger monks today involved in politics, business, and other activities unworthy of their calling.

What is necessary above all is for the young monk to find meaning and happiness in his chosen path of life, a path that does not offer the immediate satisfactions available to his comrades who remain behind in the world. If so few monks today seem to show a real joy in the Dhamma, I suspect this is because the Dhamma is not being presented to them in a way that inspires joy. For the Dhamma to exercise a magnetic power that will draw the young monk ever deeper towards the heart of the holy life, it must address their needs and aspirations at a deep interior level. This means it has to be offered to them in a way that arouses an immediate, sincere, and spontaneous response.

Lay Buddhists often complain about indiscipline in the Sangha and appeal to the Sangha elders to impose stricter controls over their pupils. I do not want to slight the problem of poor discipline, and I agree that stricter

enforcement of the Vinaya rules is essential, but I would also contend that poor discipline is more a symptom than a cause. What is primarily required is not so much stricter discipline as a far-reaching spiritual renewal that bubbles with vitality, and such a renewal cannot be instigated merely by imposing stricter disciplinary controls from above. This approach might even turn out to be counter-productive. If not conjoined with other measures designed to effect more fundamental changes in the quality of training it might turn the monastery into an open-door prison, with the monk's life made to feel like a lifetime prison sentence rather than a path to liberation. True discipline must be undertaken freely, with understanding and appreciation, and this can come about only when one sees it as a source of joy and inner freedom, not as a clamp bringing fear and frustration.

If the Sangha is to rediscover its strength and vigor, it is necessary for those who receive ordination to find a meaningful role for themselves in their lives as monks. Such a role has to resolve two contrary demands. On the one side, it must remain faithful to the ancient ideals prescribed for the Sangha by the Buddha himself, ideals which express the governing purpose of the monastic vocation. On the other, it must respond to the fluid realities of life in the contemporary world, enabling the monk to feel he has a truly relevant role in relation to the wider community.

This last point is especially important. In present day Sri Lankan society, as I explained earlier, tumultuous changes

are taking place on every side, and one of their consequences is to place the monk in an ambiguous position, almost a “double bind.” When he reviews his status from the standpoint of the Dhamma he discovers himself to be (in theory at least) the paragon of Buddhist spirituality, a living representative of the Ariya Sangharatana, a “field of merit for the world.” Yet, when he considers himself in relation to contemporary society, he is made to feel like an anachronism, a relic from an earlier age, and he thus finds his status and function stamped with profoundly disturbing question marks. These contradictory messages can precipitate a state of unbearable inner tension. One outlet from this tension is to accede to the archaic status of the traditionalist and thus become a spokesman of rigid conservatism, stubbornly resistant to change. The other outlet moves in the opposite direction: towards rebellion against all authority, including that of the Dhamma itself.

Precisely this, I believe, underlies the dilemma that confronts so many young, capable, intelligent, and earnest monks once they graduate from novice status and face the prospect of a lifetime commitment to the Sangha. If one listens with one’s inner ear, one can hear their questions, rarely expressed, hanging in the air: “Are we to pass our lives as mere symbols on which others can hang their sentimental piety, pushed to the sidelines of a secularized country running in blind pursuit of economic growth? Are we to spend our days marginalized, engaged in a ritualized routine of endless alms offerings, *pirit* recitations, and *poojas*,

functioning as religious decorations in the alcoves of peoples' lives, far removed from 'the real action'? Are we to go on preaching sermons in which we're expected to repeat only what the listeners have already heard a hundred times before, merely to tickle their sense of piety?" The rebellious and recalcitrant behavior of so many younger monks, I believe, should be read as a silent protest against this fate, a way of saying: "Let us not be fashioned into somebody else's image of what we should be. Let our inalienable humanity not be sacrificed at the altar of social expectations."

If such messages are read correctly, we would see that the appropriate response should not be one of indignation but of compassion and a heartfelt desire to help. Those who wish to help the Sangha must be less quick to criticize and condemn. Instead, they should be ready to make a genuine effort to understand the aspirations of these younger monks and help them find a context giving meaning and value to their lives, confirming the correctness of their decision to ordain. The most important steps will have to be taken by the Sangha elders, who will need to review the whole process of monastic training. But one point should be clearly understood above all else. The quest for a meaningful role in relation to present-day society should never be used by the monk to justify adopting a lifestyle that betrays his special calling. This means that the monk must not seek to make his mark on society as a political activist caught in the interminable conflicts of party politics, nor should he be

turned into a tonsured social worker or a specialist in worldly arts and sciences. The defining characteristic of the monk's life is renunciation, and this should never be undermined by a concern to find a relevant role in society. If properly undertaken, the life of renunciation is sufficiently relevant on its own: a perpetual reminder of where the true good for human beings is to be found.

Perhaps the best way to gain an insight into the kind of changes needed in the system of monastic training is to pose the question: "What is the role the monk should fulfill once he reaches maturity?" And this leads on to the next question: "What is the proper aim and purpose of the monk's life?" A meaningful program of monastic education, which is at the same time a program of monastic formation, should be formulated as answers to these questions.

When we look at the whole situation of Sri Lankan monasticism, we see that with a few noteworthy exceptions the monastic training in this country is sadly deficient. What underlies this deficiency is the lack of a clear conception of a monk's special vocation. Admittedly, in a country where some seventy percent of the population is Buddhist, monks are needed to cater to the religious needs of the people. But, we have to ask, does this justify the almost complete neglect of the unique system of spiritual training prescribed by the Buddha for the Sangha? Did he intend the Order to consist entirely of ritual specialists and cultural custodians, and to postpone the treading of his path to liberation to some future existence? To arrive at a correct conception of the

goal of monastic training we have to pierce through the established social norms and popular conventions that govern Sangha life today, not stopping until we have recovered the original conception of the monastic calling sounded by the Buddha himself. It is this conception that must be drawn out from the massive volumes of Buddhist scriptures, rejuvenated with a breath of fresh air, and placed before the monk's inner eye as the real reason for his vocation.

It is towards the realization of this ideal that the monastic training should be directed. To work out the details of this is a task that must be given a great amount of careful and intelligent thought. Here I can only speak in generalities. The first, and overriding generality, is to recognize that the primary purpose behind the monastic path is personal growth and spiritual transformation in the direction pointed to by the Buddha: growth towards Nibbāna, final liberation from suffering; transformation guided by the clear-cut steps of the Noble Eightfold Path. Stated so baldly, however, this expression of the goal may be too abstract, too remote from the everyday concerns and aptitudes of a young monk who is just setting out in his training. So let us put it differently, into a language that is more immediate and concrete: The purpose of the monk's life is to train the mind, to purify the mind, to mold the mind in the direction of liberation from greed, aversion, and delusion; to implant in the mind the purifying qualities of detachment, loving kindness, compassion, and wisdom, and to share these aspirations

with others. Whatever mode of expression is chosen is of secondary importance. What is of primary importance is a clear recognition that the guiding purpose of the monk's life should be the spiritual growth and self-transformation of the individual monk, and all other aspects of the training should be subsumed under this.

To follow through such a suggestion will require that the Sangha rediscover a discipline that has almost been lost, namely, the practice of meditation. Meditation, the methodical development of tranquility and insight, was the original lifeblood of the renunciant life, yet for most monks today it has become only a word, perhaps a topic of sermons and seminars, or a ten-minute silence in the daily devotional service. In my view, a monastic life that does not center upon the practice of meditation is merely a shadow of the genuine monastic calling, an evasion of the task entrusted to the Sangha by the Awakened One.

I am aware that not all who go forth are capable of a life of full-time meditation, and I certainly would not propose that all monks be obliged to follow such a lifestyle. Few in fact will be able to find happiness in a life devoted solely to contemplation, and throughout its long history the Sangha has had the flexibility necessary to accommodate members of diverse skills and temperaments. Within the Sangha there must be administrators, scholars, teachers, preachers, social advisers, counselors, ritual specialists, and others, and the monastic training must prepare monks to fill these varied niches—what the Christian monastic tradition calls the

“active vocations.” The more intellectually inclined monks must also be exposed to the various branches of modern knowledge which will enable him to establish bridges between the Dhamma and the intellectual advance of humankind: philosophy and psychology, comparative religion, history and literature and art. But for the monastic life to remain faithful to its original calling the practice of meditation must be restored to its rightful place: not at the fringes but at the center.

The meditative life, however, must also be integrated with a wider sense of the universal, social message of the Dhamma; otherwise it can become self-enclosed and stagnant. In fact, one of the most regrettable turns taken in the historical evolution of Theravada Buddhism, not confined to Sri Lanka but quite pervasive here, has been the sharp division of the Sangha into meditating forest monks and non-meditating town-and-village monks. This fissure has deprived both groups of the healthy balance needed to make the Dhamma a spiritually nourishing force both in this country and in the wider world. The forest monks live almost entirely aloof from society, and thus, except by silent example, rarely contribute their meditative insights and refined moral sensitivity to resolving the profound ethical and spiritual dilemmas confronting the broader human community. Responsibility for upholding the social and communal dimension of Buddhist life devolves on the active town-and-village monks, who are only too prone to assume the role of custodians of a particular social and

ethnic consciousness.

**Today it isn't only Buddhism
in Sri Lanka that is at the
crossroads,**

**but the Sangha as well, and the
direction it takes will determine
the future destiny of the
Sāsana.**

The challenges of our age are unique and unprecedented, and they require intelligent responses governed by the wide, profound perspectives of the Dhamma. Mechanical repetition of the formulas of the past simply won't work. If the Sangha continues to adhere unthinkingly to established, self-stultifying structures and does not take up the urgent task of internal criticism and renewal, it will be condemning itself, and Sri Lankan Buddhism, to irrelevance. For both alert lay Buddhists and the world community as a whole, it will be just another antiquated institution struggling to hang on to its privileges. Today a cloud of moral and spiritual confusion hangs over humankind, a cloud that grows increasingly darker and thicker. It is the true task of the Sangha, and of Buddhism itself, to help dispel this confusion with the Buddha's own boundless wisdom and compassion. But if the Sangha is to rise up to this challenge,

it must be ready to make some radical changes in its own system of recruitment, training, and practice. True, this will be a difficult task, but it is one that must be met.

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