1.1 Buddhism and the new global society

It is the manifest suffering and folly in the world that invokes humane and compassionate social action in its many different forms. For Buddhists this situation raises fundamental and controversial questions. And here, also, Buddhism has implications of some significance for Christians, humanists and other non-Buddhists.

By "social action" we mean the many different kinds of action intended to benefit mankind. These range from simple individual acts of charity, teaching and training, organized kinds of service, "Right Livelihood" in and outside the helping professions, and through various kinds of community development as well as to political activity in working for a better society.

Buddhism is a pragmatic teaching which starts from certain fundamental propositions about how we experience the world and how we act in it. It teaches that it is possible to transcend this sorrow-laden world of our experience and is concerned first and last with ways of achieving that transcendence. What finally leads to such transcendence is what we call Wisdom. The enormous literature of Buddhism is not a literature of revelation and authority. Instead, it uses ethics and meditation, philosophy and science, art and poetry to point a Way to this Wisdom. Similarly, Buddhist writing on social action, unlike secular writings, makes finite proposals which must ultimately refer to this Wisdom, but which also are arguable in terms of our common experience.

In the East, Buddhism developed different schools of "traditions," serving the experiences of different cultures, ranging from Sri Lanka through Tibet and Mongolia to Japan. Buddhism may thus appear variously as sublime humanism, magical mysticism, poetic paradox and much else. These modes of expression, however, all converge upon the fundamental teaching, the "perennial Buddhism." This pamphlet is based upon the latter, drawing upon the different oriental traditions to present the teachings in an attempt to relate them to our modern industrial society.

From the evidence of the Buddha's discourses, or suttas in the Digha Nikaya, it is clear that early Buddhists were very much concerned with the creation of social conditions favorable to the individual cultivation of Buddhist values. An outstanding example of this, in later times, is the remarkable "welfare state" created by the Buddhist emperor, Asoka (B.C. 274-236). Walpola Rahula stated the situation — perhaps at its strongest — when he wrote that "Buddhism arose in India as a spiritual force against social injustices, against degrading superstitious rites, ceremonies and sacrifices; it denounced the tyranny of the caste system and advocated the equality of all men; it emancipated woman and gave her complete spiritual freedom." (Rahula, 1978). The Buddhist scriptures do indicate the general direction of Buddhist social thinking, and
to that extent they are suggestive for our own times. Nevertheless it would be pedantic, and in some cases absurd, to apply directly to modern industrial society social prescriptions detailed to meet the needs of social order which flourished twenty-three centuries ago. The Buddhist householder of the Sigalovada Sutta [1] experienced a different way of life from that of a computer consultant in Tokyo or an unemployed black youth in Liverpool. And the conditions which might favor their cultivation of the Middle Way must be secured by correspondingly different — and more complex — social, economic and political strategies.

It is thus essential to attempt to distinguish between perennial Buddhism on the one hand and, on the other, the specific social prescriptions attributed to the historical Buddha which related the basic, perennial teaching to the specific conditions of his day. We believe that it is unscholarly to transfer the scriptural social teaching uncritically and with careful qualification to modern societies, or to proclaim that the Buddha was a democrat and an internationalist. The modern terms "democracy" and "internationalism" did not exist in the sense in which we understand them in the emergent feudal society in which the Buddha lived. Buddhism is ill-served in the long run by such special pleading. On the other hand, it is arguable that there are democratic and internationalist implications in the basic Buddhist teachings.

In the past two hundred years society in the West has undergone a more fundamental transformation than at any period since Neolithic times, whether in terms of technology or the world of ideas. And now in the East while this complex revolution is undercutting traditional Buddhism, it is also stimulating oriental Buddhism; and in the West it is creating problems and perceptions to which Buddhism seems particularly relevant. Throughout its history Buddhism has been successfully reinterpreted in accordance with different cultures, whilst at the same time preserving its inner truths. Thus has Buddhism spread and survived. The historic task of Buddhists in both East and West in the twenty-first century is to interpret perennial Buddhism in terms of the needs of industrial man and woman in the social conditions of their time, and to demonstrate its acute and urgent relevance to the ills of that society. To this great and difficult enterprise Buddhists will bring their traditional boldness and humility. For certainly this is no time for clinging to dogma and defensiveness.

1.2 Social action and the problem of suffering

In modern Western society, humanistic social action, in its bewildering variety of forms, is seen both as the characteristic way of relieving suffering and enhancing human well-being and, at the same time, as a noble ideal of service, of self-sacrifice, by humanists of all faiths.

Buddhism, however, is a humanism in that it rejoices in the possibility of a true freedom as something inherent in human nature. For Buddhism, the ultimate freedom is to achieve full release from the root causes of all suffering: greed, hatred and delusion, which clearly are also the root causes of all social evils. Their grossest forms are those which are harmful to others. To weaken, and finally eliminate them in oneself, and, as far as possible, in society, is the basis of Buddhist ethics. And here Buddhist social action has its place.
The experience of suffering is the starting point of Buddhist teaching and of any attempt to define a distinctively Buddhist social action. However, misunderstanding can arise at the start, because the Pali word dukkha, which is commonly translated simply as "suffering," has a much wider and more subtle meaning. There is, of course, much gross, objective suffering in the world (dukkha-dukkha), and much of this arises from poverty, war, oppression and other social conditions. We cling to our good fortune and struggle at all costs to escape from our bad fortune.

This struggle may not be so desperate in certain countries which enjoy a high material standard of living spread relatively evenly throughout the population. Nevertheless, the material achievements of such societies appear somehow to have been "bought" by social conditions which breed a profound sense of insecurity and anxiety, of restlessness and inner confusion, in contrast to the relatively stable and ordered society in which the Buddha taught.

Lonely, alienated industrial man has unprecedented opportunities for living life "in the context of equipment," as the philosopher Martin Heidegger so aptly put it. He has a highly valued freedom to make meaning of his life from a huge variety of more or less readily available forms of consumption or achievement — whether career building, home making, shopping around for different world ideologies (such as Buddhism), or dedicated social service. When material acquisition palls, there is the collection of new experiences and the clocking up of new achievements. Indeed, for many their vibrating busyness becomes itself a more important self-confirmation that the goals to which it is ostensibly directed. In developing countries to live thus, "in the context of equipment," has become the great goal for increasing numbers of people. They are watched sadly by Westerners who have accumulated more experience of the disillusion and frustration of perpetual non-arrival.

Thus, from the experience of social conditions there arises both physical and psychological suffering. But more fundamental still is that profound sense of unease, of anxiety or angst, which arises from the very transience (anicca) of life (viparinama-dukkha). This angst, however conscious of it we may or may not be, drives the restless search to establish a meaningful self-identity in the face of a disturbing awareness of our insubstantiality (anatta). Ultimately, life is commonly a struggle to give meaning to life — and to death. This is so much the essence of the ordinary human condition and we are so very much inside it, that for much of the time we are scarcely aware of it. This existential suffering is the distillation of all the various conditions to which we have referred above — it is the human condition itself.

Buddhism offers to the individual human being a religious practice, a Way, leading to the transcendence of suffering. Buddhist social action arises from this practice and contributes to it. From suffering arises desire to end suffering. The secular humanistic activist sets himself the endless task of satisfying that desire, and perhaps hopes to end social suffering by constructing utopias. The Buddhist, on the other hand, is concerned ultimately with the transformation of desire. Hence he contemplates and experiences social action in a fundamentally different way from the secular activist. This way will not be readily comprehensible to the latter, and has helped give rise to the erroneous belief that Buddhism is indifferent to human suffering. One reason why the subject of this pamphlet is so important to Buddhists is that they will have to start here if they are to begin to communicate effectively with non-Buddhist social activists. We
should add, however, that although such communication may not be easy on the intellectual plane, at the level of feelings shared in compassionate social action experience together, there may be little difficulty.

We have already suggested one source of the widespread belief that Buddhism is fatalistic and is indifferent to humanistic social action. This belief also appears to stem from a misunderstanding of the Buddhist law of Karma. In fact, there is no justification for interpreting the Buddhist conception of karma as implying quietism and fatalism. The word karma (Pali: kamma) mean volitional action in deeds, words and thoughts, which may be morally good or bad. To be sure, our actions are conditioned (more or less so), but they are not inescapably determined. Though human behavior and thought are too often governed by deeply ingrained habits or powerful impulses, still there is always the potentiality of freedom — or, to be more exact, of a relative freedom of choice. To widen the range of that freedom is the primary task of Buddhist mind training and meditation.

The charge of fatalism is sometimes supported by reference to the alleged "social backwardness" of Asia. But this ignores the fact that such backwardness existed also in the West until comparatively recent times. Surely, this backwardness and the alleged fatalistic acceptance of it stem from the specific social and political conditions, which were too powerful for would-be reformers to contend with. But apart from these historic facts, it must be stressed here that the Buddha's message of compassion is certainly not indifferent to human suffering in any form; nor do Buddhists think that social misery cannot be remedied, at least partly. Though Buddhist realism does not believe in the Golden Age of a perfect society, nor in the permanence of social conditions, yet Buddhism strongly believes that social imperfections can be reduced, by the reduction of greed, hatred and ignorance, and by compassionate action guided by wisdom.

From the many utterances of the Buddha, illustrative of our remarks, two may be quoted here:

"He who has understanding and great wisdom does not think of harming himself or another, nor of harming both alike. He rather thinks of his own welfare, of that of others, of that of both, and of the welfare of the whole world. In that way one shows understanding and great wisdom."

— Anguttara Nikaya (Gradual Sayings) Fours, No. 186

"By protecting oneself (e.g., morally), one protects others; by protecting others, one protects oneself."

— Samyutta Nikaya (Kindred Sayings) 47; Satipatthana Samy., No. 19

In this section we have introduced the special and distinctive quality of Buddhist social action. In the remainder of Part One we shall explore this quality further, and show how it arises naturally and logically from Buddhist teaching and practice.

1.3 The weight of social karma
Individual karmic behavior patterns are created by the struggles of the individual human predicament. They condition the behavior of the individual and, in traditional Buddhist teaching, the subsequent rounds of birth and rebirth. We suggest, however, that this karmic inheritance is also expressed as social karma. Specific to time and place, different social cultures arise, whether of a group, a community, a social class or a civilization. The young are socialized to their inherited culture. Consciously and unconsciously they assimilate the norms of the approved behavior — what is good, what is bad, and what is "the good life" for that culture.

The social karma — the establishment of conditioned behavior patterns — of a particular culture is and is not the aggregate of the karma of the individuals who comprise the culture. Individuals share common institutions and belief systems, but these are the results of many different wills, both in the past and the present, rather than the consequence of any single individual action. It is, however, individual karmic action that links the individual to these institutions and belief systems. Each individual is a light-reflecting jewel in Indra's net, at the points where time and space intersect. Each reflects the light of all and all of each. This is the mysticism of sociology or the sociology of mysticism!

Human societies, too, suffer the round of birth and rebirth, of revolution and stability. Each age receives the collective karmic inheritance of the last, is conditioned by it, and yet also struggles to refashion it. And within each human society, institutions, social classes, and subcultures, as well as individuals, all struggle to establish their identity and perpetuate their existence.

Capitalist industrial society has created conditions of extreme impermanence, and the struggle with a conflict-creating mood of dissatisfaction and frustration. It would be difficult to imagine any social order for which Buddhism is more relevant and needed. In these conditions, egotistical enterprise, competitive conflict, and the struggle for status become great social virtues, while, in fact, they illustrate the import of the three root-causes of suffering — greed, hatred, and delusion.

"These cravings," argues David Brandon, "have become cemented into all forms of social structures and institutions. People who are relatively successful at accumulating goods and social position wish to ensure that the remain successful... Both in intended and unintended ways they erect barriers of education, finance and law to protect their property and other interests... These structures and their protective institutions continue to exacerbate and amplify the basic human inequalities in housing, health care, education and income. They reward and encourage greed, selfishness, and exploitation rather than love, sharing and compassion. Certain people's life styles, characterized by greed and overconsumption, become dependent on the deprivation of the many. The oppressors and oppressed fall into the same trap of continual craving" (Brandon, 1976, 10-11). It should be added that communist revolution and invasion have created conditions and social structures which no less, but differently, discourage the spiritual search.

Thus we see that modern social organization may create conditions of life which not only give rise to "objective," non-volitionally caused suffering, but also tend to give rise to "subjective," volitionally caused karmic suffering, because they are more likely to stimulate negative karmic action than do other kinds of social organization. Thus, some of us are born into social conditions which are more likely to lead us into following the Buddhist way than others. An unskilled
woman factory worker in a provincial factory town is, for example, less likely to follow the Path
than a professional person living in the university quarter of the capital city. A property
speculator, wheeling and dealing his samsaric livelihood anywhere is perhaps even
less likely than either of them to do so. However, all three may do so. Men and women make
their own history, but they make it under specific karmic conditions, inherited from previous
generations collectively, as well as individually. The struggle is against nurture, as well as nature,
manifested in the one consciousness. "The present generation are living in this world under great
pressure, under a very complicated system, amidst confusion. Everybody talks about peace,
justice, equality but in practice it is very difficult. This is not because the individual person is bad
but because the overall environment, the pressures, the circumstances are so strong, so
influential" (Dalai Lama, 1976, p. 17).

In short, Buddhist social action is justified ultimately and above all by the existence of social as
well as individual karma. Immediately it is simply concerned with relieving suffering; ultimately,
in creating social conditions which will favor the ending of suffering through the individual
achievement of transcendent wisdom. But is it enough, to take a beautiful little watering can to a
flower dying in sandy, sterile soil? This will satisfy only the waterer. But if we muster the
necessary plows, wells, irrigation systems and organized labor, what then will become of the
spiritual life amongst all this busyness and conflict? We must next consider this fundamental
question.

2.1 Giving and helping

All social action is an act of giving (dana), but there is a direct act which we call charitable
action, whether it be the UNESCO Relief Banker's Order or out all night with the destitutes' soup
kitchen. Is there anything about Buddhism that should make it less concerned actively to
maintain the caring society than is Christianity or humanism? "Whoever nurses the sick serves
me," said the Buddha. In our more complex society does this not include the active advancement
and defense of the principles of a national health service?

The old phrase "as cold as charity" recalls numerous possibilities for self-deception in giving to
others and in helping them. Here is opportunity to give out goodness in tangible form, both in
our own eyes and those of the world. It may also be a temptation to impose our own ideas and
standards from a position of patronage. David Brandon, who has written so well on the art of
helping, reminds us that "respect is seeing the Buddha nature in the other person. It means
perceiving the superficiality of positions of moral authority. The other person is as good as you.
However untidy, unhygienic, poor, illiterate and bloody-minded he may seem, he is worthy of
your respect. He also has autonomy and purpose. He is another form of nature" (Brandon, 1976,
p. 59).

There are many different ways in which individual Buddhists and their organizations can give
help and relieve suffering. However, "charity begins at home." If a Buddhist group or society
fails to provide human warmth and active caring for all of its members in their occasional
difficulties and troubles — though always with sensitivity and scrupulous respect for privacy —
where then is its Buddhism? Where is the Sangha?
In our modern industrial society there has been on the one hand a decline in personal and voluntary community care for those in need and, on the other, too little active concern for the quality and quantity of institutional care financed from the public purse that has to some extent taken its place. One facet of this which may be of particular significance for Buddhists, is a failure to recognize adequately and provide for the needs of the dying. In recent years there has been a growing awareness of this problem in North America and Europe, and a small number of hospices have been established by Christian and other groups for terminally ill people. However, only a start has been made with the problem. The first Buddhist hospice in the West has yet to be opened. And, less ambitiously, the support of regular visitors could help many lonely people to die with a greater sense of dignity and independence in our general hospitals.

2.2 Teaching

Teaching is, of course, also a form of giving and helping. Indeed, one of the two prime offenses in the Mahayana code of discipline is that of withholding the wealth of the Dharma from others. Moreover, teaching the Dharma is one of the most valuable sources of learning open to a Buddhist.

Here we are concerned primarily with the teaching of the Dharma to newcomers in Buddhism, and with the general publicizing of Buddhism among non-Buddhists.

Buddhism is by its very nature lacking in the aggressive evangelizing spirit of Christianity or Islam. It is a pragmatic system of sustained and systematic self-help practice, in which the teacher can do no more than point the way and, together with fellow Buddhists, provide support, warmth and encouragement in a long and lonely endeavor. There is here no tradition of instant conversion and forceful revelation for the enlightenment experience, however sudden, depends upon a usually lengthy period of careful cultivation. Moreover, there is a tolerant tradition of respect for the beliefs and spiritual autonomy of non-Buddhists.

Nevertheless, a virtue may be cultivated to a fault. Do we not need to find a middle way between proselytizing zeal and aloof indifference? Does not the world cry out for a Noble Truth that "leads to the cessation of suffering"? The task of teaching the Dharma also gives individual Buddhists an incentive to clarify their ideas in concise, explicit, everyday terms. And it requires them to respond positively to the varied responses which their teaching will provoke in others.

It will be helpful to treat the problem on two overlapping levels, and to distinguish between (a) publicizing the Dhamma, and (b) introductory teaching for enquirers who interest has thus been awakened.

At both the above levels activity is desirable both by a central body of some kind and by local groups (in many countries there will certainly be several "central bodies," representing different traditions and tendencies). The central body can cost-effectively produce for local use introductory texts and study guides, speakers' notes, audiocassettes, slide presentations and "study kits" combining all of these different types of material. It has the resources to develop correspondence courses such as those run by the Buddhist Society in the United Kingdom which
offer a well-tried model. And it will perhaps have sufficient prestige to negotiate time on the national radio and television network.

Particularly in Western countries there are strong arguments for organizations representing the different Buddhist traditions and tendencies to set up a representative Buddhist Information and Liaison Service for propagating fundamental Buddhism and some first introductions to the different traditions and organizations. It would also provide a general information clearing house for all the groups and organizations represented. It could be financed and controlled through a representative national Buddhist council which, with growing confidence between its members and between the different Buddhist organizations which they represented, might in due course take on additional functions. Certainly in the West there is the prospect of a great many different Buddhist flowers blooming, whether oriental or new strains developed in the local culture. This is to be welcomed, but the kind of body we propose will become a necessity to avoid confusion for the outsider and to work against any tendency to sectarianism of a kind from which Buddhism has been relatively free.

Local groups will be able to draw upon the publicity and teaching resources of national centers and adapt these to the needs of local communities. Regular meetings of such groups may amount to no more than half a dozen people meeting in a private house. Sensitively handled it would be difficult to imagine a better way of introducing a newcomer to the Dharma. Such meetings are worthy of wide local publicity. A really strong local base exists where there is a resident Buddhist community of some kind, with premises convenient for meetings and several highly committed workers. Unfortunately, such communities will, understandably, represent a particular Buddhist tradition or tendency, and this exclusiveness may be less helpful to the newcomer than a local group in which he or she may have the opportunity to become acquainted with the different Buddhist traditions represented in the membership and in the program of activity.

In many countries the schools provide brief introductions to the world's great religions. Many teachers do not feel sufficiently knowledgeable about introducing Buddhism to their pupils and may be unaware of suitable materials even where these do exist. There may be opportunities here for local groups, and certainly the Information Service suggested above would have work to do here.

Finally, the method of introductory teaching employed in some Buddhist centers leaves much to be desired both on educational grounds and as Buddhist teaching. The Buddha always adapted his teaching to the particular circumstances of the individual learner; he sometimes opened with a question about the enquirer's occupation in life, and built his teaching upon the answer to this and similar questions. True learning and teaching has as its starting point a problem or experience posed by the learner, even if this be no more than a certain ill-defined curiosity. It is there that teacher and learner must begin. The teacher starts with the learner's thoughts and feelings and helps him or her to develop understanding and awareness. This is, of course, more difficult than a standard lecture which begins and ends with the teacher's thoughts and feelings, and which may in more sense than one leave little space for the learner. It will exclude the teacher from any learning.
It follows that unless the teacher is truly inspiring, the "Dharma talk" is best used selectively: to introduce and stimulate discussion or to summarize and consolidate what has been learned. Dharma teachers must master the arts of conducting open discussion groups, in which learners can gain much from one another and can work through an emotional learning situation beyond the acquisition of facts about Buddhism. Discussion groups have become an important feature of many lay Buddhist and social action organizations in different parts of the world. They are the heart, for example, of the Japanese mass organization Rissho Kosei Kai, which explores problems of work, the family and social and economic problems.

2.3 Political action: the conversion of energy

Political power may manifest and sustain social and economic structures which breed both material deprivation and spiritual degradation for millions of men and women. In many parts of the world it oppresses a wide range of social groupings — national and racial minorities, women, the poor, homosexuals, liberal dissidents, and religious groups. Ultimately, political power finds its most terrible expression in war, which reaches now to the possibility of global annihilation.

For both the oppressors and the oppressed, whether in social strife or embattled nations, karmic delusion is deepened. Each group or nation emphasizes its differences, distinguishing them from its opponents; each projects its own short-comings upon them, makes them the repository of all evil, and rallies round its own vivid illusions and blood-warming hates. Collective hating, whether it be the raised fist, or prejudice concealed in a quiet community, is a heady liquor. Allied with an ideology, hate in any form will not depart tomorrow or next year. Crowned with delusive idealism, it is an awesome and murderous folly. And even when victory is achieved, the victors are still more deeply poisoned by the hate that carried them to victory. Both the revolution and the counter-revolution consume their own children. Buddhism's "Three Fires" of delusion (moha), hatred and ill-will (dosa), and greed and grasping, (lobha), surely burn nowhere more fiercely.

Contrariwise, political power may be used to fashion and sustain a society whose citizens are free to live in dignity and harmony and mutual respect, free of the degradation of poverty and war. In such a society of good heart all men and women find encouragement and support in making, if they will, the best use of their human condition in the practice of wisdom and compassion. This is the land of good karma — not the end of human suffering, but the beginning of the end, the bodhisattva-land, the social embodiment of sila.

This is not to be confused with the belief common among the socially and politically oppressed that if power could be seized (commonly by an elite claiming to represent them), then personal, individual, "ideological" change will inevitably follow. This absolutely deterministic view of conditioning (which Marx called "vulgar Marxism"), is as one-sided as the idea of a society of "individuals" each struggling with only his own personal karma in a private bubble hermetically sealed off from history and from other people.

Political action thus involves the Buddhist ideal of approaching each situation without prejudice but with deserved circumspection in questions of power and conflict, social oppression and
social justice. These social and political conflicts are the great public samsaric driving energies of our life to which an individual responds with both aggression and self-repression. The Buddha Dharma offers the possibility of transmuting the energies of the individual into Wisdom and Compassion. At the very least, in faith and with good heart, a start can be made.

Buddhists are thus concerned with political action, first, in the direct relief of non-volitionally caused suffering now and in the future, and, secondly, with the creation of social karmic conditions favorable to the following of the Way that leads to the cessation also of volitionally-caused suffering, the creation of a society of a kind which tends to the ripening of wisdom and compassion rather than the withering of them. In the third place, political action, turbulent and ambiguous, is perhaps the most potent of the "action meditations."

It is perhaps because of this potency that some Buddhist organizations ban political discussion of any kind, even at a scholarly level, and especially any discussion of social action. There are circumstances in which this may be a sound policy. Some organizations and some individuals may not wish to handle such an emotionally powerful experience which may prove to be divisive and stir up bad feeling which cannot be worked upon in any positive way. This division would particularly tend to apply to "party politics." On the other hand, such a discussion may give an incomparable opportunity to work through conflict to a shared wisdom. Different circumstances suggest different "skillful means," but a dogmatic policy of total exclusion is likely to be ultimately unhelpful.

In this connection it is worth noting that any kind of social activity which leads to the exercise of power or conflict may stir up "the fires" in the same way as overtly political activity. Conflict within a Buddhist organization is cut from the same cloth as conflict in a political assembly and may be just as heady, but the Buddhist context could make such an activity a much more difficult and delusive meditation subject. The danger of dishonest collusion may be greater than that of honest collusion (to borrow one of the Ven. Sangharakshita's aphorisms). The dogmatism and vehemence with which some Buddhists denounce and proscribe all political involvement is the same sad attitude as the dogmatism and vehemence of the politicians which they so rightly denounce.

To be lost in revolution or reform or conservatism is to be lost in samsara and the realm of the angry warrior, deluded by his power and his self-righteousness. To turn one's back upon all this is to be lost in an equally false idea of nirvana — the realm of the gods no less deluded by spiritual power and righteousness, "You do not truly speak of fire if your mouth does not get burnt."

Effective social action on any but the smallest scale will soon involve the Buddhist in situations of power and conflict, of "political" power. It may be the power of office in a Buddhist organization. It may be the unsought for leadership of an action group protesting against the closing of an old people's day care center. It may be the organizing of a fund-raising movement to build a Buddhist hospice for care of the dying. It may be membership of a local government council with substantial welfare funds. It may be joining an illegal dissident group. In all these cases the Buddhist takes the tiger — his own tiger — by the tail. Some of the above tigers are
bigger than others, but all are just as fierce. Hence a Buddhist must be mindful of the strong animal smell of political power and be able to contain and convert the valuable energy which power calls up. A sharp cutting edge is given into his hands. Its use we must explore in the sections which follow.

2.8 The good society

The social order to which Buddhist social action is ultimately directed must be one that minimizes non-volitionally caused suffering, whether in mind or body, and which also offers encouraging conditions for its citizens to see more clearly into their true nature and overcome their karmic inheritance. The Buddhist way is, with its compassion, its equanimity, its tolerance, its concern for self-reliance and individual responsibility, the most promising of all the models for the New Society which are on offer.

What is needed are political and economic relations and a technology which will:

(a) Help people to overcome ego-centeredness, through co-operation with others, in place of either subordination and exploitation or the consequent sense of "righteous" struggle against all things.

(b) Offer to each a freedom which is conditional only upon the freedom and dignity of others, so that individuals may develop a self-reliant responsibility rather than being the conditioned animals of institutions and ideologies. (See "Buddhism and Democracy," Bodhi Leaves No. B. 17)

The emphasis should be on the undogmatic acceptance of a diversity of tolerably compatible material and mental "ways," whether of individuals or of whole communities. There are no short cuts to utopia, whether by "social engineering" or theocracy. The good society towards which we should aim should simply provide a means, an environment, in which different "ways," appropriate to different kinds of people, may be cultivated in mutual tolerance and understanding. A prescriptive commonwealth of saints is totally alien to Buddhism.

(c) The good society will concern itself primarily with the material and social conditions for personal growth, and only secondarily and dependently with material production. It is noteworthy that the 14th Dalai Lama, on his visit to the West in 1973, saw "nothing wrong with material progress provided man takes precedence over progress. In fact it has been my firm belief that in order to solve human problems in all their dimensions we must be able to combine and harmonize external material progress with inner mental development." The Dalai Lama contrasted the "many problems like poverty and disease, lack of education" in the East with the West, in which "the living standard is remarkably high, which is very important, very good." Yet he notes that despite these achievements there is "mental unrest," pollution, overcrowding, and other problems. "Our very life itself is a paradox, contradictory in many senses; whenever you have too much of one thing you have problems created by that. You always have extremes and therefore it is important to try and find the middle way, to balance the two" (Dalai Lama, 1976, pp. 10, 14, 29).
(d) E.F. Schumacher has concisely expressed the essence of Buddhist economics as follows:

"While the materialist is mainly interested in goods, the Buddhist is mainly interested in liberation. But Buddhism is 'The Middle Way' and therefore in no way antagonistic to physical well-being... The keynote of Buddhist economics is simplicity and non-violence. From an economist's point of view, the marvel of the Buddhist way of life is the utter rationality of its pattern — amazingly small means leading to extraordinarily satisfying results" (Schumacher, 1973, p. 52).

Schumacher then outlines a "Buddhist economics" in which production would be based on a middle range technology yielding on the one hand an adequate range of material goods (and no more), and on the other a harmony with the natural environment and its resources. (See also Dr. Padmasiri de Silva's pamphlet *The Search for a Buddhist Economics*, in the series, Bodhi Leaves, No. B. 69)

The above principles suggest some kind of diverse and politically decentralized society, with cooperative management and ownership of productive wealth. It would be conceived on a human scale, whether in terms of size and complexity of organization or of environmental planning, and would use modern technology selectively rather than being used by it in the service of selfish interests. In Schumacher's words, "It is a question of finding the right path of development, the Middle Way, between materialist heedlessness and traditionalist immobility, in short, of finding 'Right Livelihood.'"

Clearly, all the above must ultimately be conceived on a world scale. "Today we have become so interdependent and so closely connected with each other that without a sense of universal responsibility, irrespective of different ideologies and faiths, our very existence or survival would be difficult" (Dalai Lama, 1976, pp. 5, 28). This statement underlines the importance of Buddhist internationalism and of social policy and social action conceived on a world scale.

The above is not offered as some kind of blueprint for utopia. Progress would be as conflict-ridden as the spiritual path of the ordinary Buddhist — and the world may never get there anyway. However, Buddhism is a very practical and pragmatic kind of idealism, and there is, as always, really no alternative but to try.

**Conclusion**

Certainly in the West many Buddhists will maintain that it is necessary to take one step at a time, and that for the present our individual and collective action must go into the inner strengthening of our faith and practice. They would doubtless agree on the importance of teaching the Dharma, which we have characterized as one of the important forms of social action, but they would argue that the seduction of other kinds of social action, and the drain of energy, are greater than the opportunities which it can afford for "wearing out the shoe of samsara." They would argue that the best way to help other people is by personal example.
This pamphlet concedes some possible truth to the above position but also offers a wide range of evidence to the contrary, to which in retrospect the reader may now wish to return. Whatever we may feel about it, certainly the debate is a worthwhile one since, as we have seen, it points to the very heart of Buddhism — the harmony, or creative equilibrium, of Wisdom and Compassion. And as in all worthwhile debates, the disagreement, and, still more, the possible sense of disagreeableness which it engenders, offers each of us a valuable meditation.

The needs and aptitudes of individual differ, and our debate will also appear differently to readers in different countries with different cultural backgrounds. Though we are brothers and sisters to one another, as Buddhists each must light his or her own way. To the enquiring reader who has little knowledge of Buddhism and yet who has managed to stay with me to the end, I offer my apologies if I have sometimes seemed to forget him and if my explanations have proved inadequate. For

"This is where words fail: for what can words tell
Of things that have no yesterday, tomorrow or today?"

— Tseng Ts'an

To a world knotted in hatreds and aggression and a host of follies, grand and mean, heroic and base, Buddhism offers a unique combination of unshakable equanimity and a deeply compassionate practical concern. And so may we tread lightly through restless experience, riding out defeats and discouragements, aware always of the peace at the heart of things, of the freedom that is free of nothing.

References


