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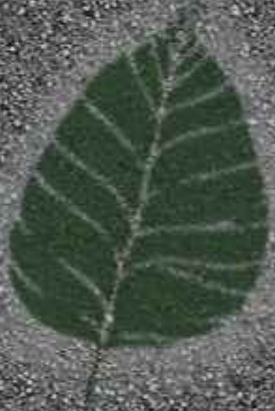
Family Planning & Birth Control in Buddhist Perspective

Louis van Loon



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Family Planning & Birth Control in Buddhist Perspective

By

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Childbirth will always be a major event in any community of people. It signifies, at once, emotional fulfilment and old age security for the parents; stability and continuity for the tribe. Life, of course, is always valued highly by the living, but childbirth is a unique and special affirmation of life. Childbirth is thus likely to acquire deep religious significance no matter what belief system a community follows. Religion is, after all, a kind of barometer that registers life's meaningfulness and measures the values and norms that determine the psychological and physical well-being of the individual and society.

The intuition that life is precious and must be preserved and fostered at all cost can, on occasion, act against both the living and those still to be born. This happens when human existence is considered worthwhile for its own sake and any attempt to limit its volume is frowned upon, even when it is clear—as it is to us today—that with an ever-increasing number

of lives, those same lives are rendered increasingly unsatisfactory or even meaningless. Religious belief then has to pass a subtle test: are its spiritual principles and moral directives able to harmonise both the quantity and the quality of human life, not sacrificing the one for the other? Ultimately, this involves stating a religion's attitude to population control measures that a people may be willing—or forced—to practise when circumstances demand that they stabilise or limit the size of their community.

In the present paper I will attempt to elucidate the Buddhist perspective on family planning and birth control. I will first discuss Buddhism's attitude to procreation and sexuality in general; in the course of this discussion I will show how the Buddhist attitude differs significantly from Brahmanical (Hindu) attitudes, a difference underscored by the Buddhist emphasis on the renunciation of family life for the homeless life of a celibate monk or nun. Then I will discuss how the Buddha viewed the place of the family in society, highlighting the implications this holds for family planning. Lastly I will investigate whether, in any situation that calls for the checking of population growth, Buddhist doctrine has any practical guidelines to offer. Here I will draw on the experiences of Buddhistic cultures, some of which, like Japan, have achieved the most spectacular results in

stabilising their populations.

The Buddha and the Brahmins

Buddhism's attitude to fertility, procreation, and family life was distinctly different from—even opposed to—the traditional Brahmanical or Hindu outlook. Archaic Brahmanical tradition—the background against which Buddhism arose in India in the sixth century B.C.—had laid an exceptionally heavy emphasis on fertility and procreation. The Laws of Manu allowed a wife who was not bearing any sons to be replaced by a second or a third wife or even to be turned out of the house altogether. In an age of high infant mortality it was important to them to ensure that at least one male descendant survived to perform the last rites upon the father's death. A large family was an insurance against this. It was through one's sons that one achieved immortality and redeemed one's debt to one's forbears. This made one's peaceable departure to the world of one's ancestors possible and ensured the continuation of the generation. In the Brahmanical view a son is a *putra*: "one who protects against going to hell."

While the Brahmins, who were the Buddha's contemporaries, openly ridiculed the idea of becoming an ascetic (they called them "bald pates") and held

family life to be more fruitful, the Buddha considered secular, married life to be an obstacle to the fruit of his path, the achievement of Enlightenment. The "best life," the life most conducive to spiritual emancipation, he maintained, could be had by "going forth" from worldly society and becoming a monastic celibate: "Cramped and confined is the household life, a den of dust, but the life of the homeless one is like the open air! Hard it is for him who bides at home to live out as it should be lived the Holy Life in all its perfection, in all its purity! [1] " The Buddha himself, of course, had gone forth. Many members of his family eventually joined his monastic order (Sangha): his wife and son, foster mother and stepbrother, and several cousins all renounced family life.

The Buddha's provision of a life of renunciation for his followers sprang from his insight into the nature of human existence. The Buddha saw that there was a lot more to birth and the giving of birth than the coming into being of a descendant who would perform the last rites over dad's dead body and carry on the family name. Giving birth is a serious matter. The First Noble Truth begins: "Birth, O monks, is suffering." The Buddha meant that one's overwhelming experience in life, from the moment of birth, is a feeling of lack and unsatisfactoriness due to the fact that one is subject to "decay, disease, and death," and relentlessly prone to

being "united with the unpleasant, separated from the pleasant, and not getting what one wants." Real enduring happiness continuously escapes one. Being born is not all fun.

The Second Noble Truth, which deals with the cause of suffering, begins: "It is (that) craving which produces (re)birth …" This touches on the deeper metaphysics of the Buddha's teachings and need not be discussed here at any length. Suffice it to say that birth and rebirth, according to the Buddha, is a causal process driven by desires of all kinds—desires that relate to and interact with material objects and conditions (including the physical body)—in ever recurrent cycles of manifestation. Therefore, when a birth takes place, a "desire-being" literally takes material form and thenceforth generally spends its life in hedonic pursuits, involving itself in causal activities that propel it from one life experience into another (its "karma").

No one, if he were wise, would wish to become involved in birth or rebirth or the giving of birth. Hence, the admonition to go forth. For this reason, too, monks in Buddhist countries do not as a rule participate in or officiate at weddings. Similarly, monks are in no way involved when births take place, nor do they (or are they supposed to) enter into any discussion regarding the size or composition of the

family unit or the use of contraceptives, etc. This is not the province of those who have gone forth and have done away with all these things.

Significantly, the Buddha himself renounced family life at the very moment his son was born. Upon hearing the news of the birth, he is reported to have exclaimed: "An impediment (*rahu*) has been born; a fetter has arisen." His grandfather accordingly named the infant Rāhula.

The Origin of Sexuality

Not only is the life of householders full of potential suffering— subject as they are to so much strife and anxiety in the acquisition and safeguarding of livelihood and possessions—but as parents they are, in addition, instrumental in bringing yet other beings into the world of suffering. It is a weighty matter. What gives us our sexuality? What drives us to procreation? Why do we look for fulfilment in family life?

The Buddha's allegorical explanation of how, in the first place, sexuality comes about in a cyclically evolving and involving universe, throws an interesting light on the place of the family and procreation in his worldview. [2] Initially, at the beginning of an evolving universe, living beings are

subtle and "self-luminous." They are "mind-borne," self-contained and self-sufficient, and "feed on joy." There are no sexual distinctions, just as there are no sun and moon, day or night. Then a certain wonderment or reflectiveness sets in—a "restlessness" (*lola*) or "wantonness." With that, an attractive-looking "enjoyment-earth" spontaneously appears. When a desire to experience this "something other" arises, the beings lose their original inner contentment and innocence. Upon tasting the earth, craving for more arises. As a consequence, the beings' ability to feed themselves on joy alone disappears. Their "self-luminosity" also vanishes. In its place, the sun and moon, day and night, and all kinds of other dualities arise.

Gradually, as the enjoyment-earth is consumed and is replaced by coarser and coarser substances, more and more differentiation in the beings themselves takes place. Some become ugly, others beautiful; some acquire female characteristics and others masculine ones. Like and dislike arises in connection with these differences. Wantonness now directs itself towards the attractive-looking opposite sex. At first, those beings not involved in sexual intercourse are appalled at seeing this display of lust between some of the beings for each other's bodies. Interestingly, the Buddha traces a very ancient tribal ritual of throwing mud,

dung, and ash at a bridal couple to this phase in human evolution— an origin which, he says, the people of his day no longer remember. Then he says: "What was agreed to be bad (principle) at that time … is at present agreed to be good (principle). At that time those who indulged in the principle of sex were not allowed to enter a village or town for a month or two months. Since some beings indulged excessively in that bad principle, they went into houses to do it secretly."

The sutta goes on to trace the symbolic origin of many other habits and human institutions, such as the taking of life, stealing and lying, the need to grow food, to establish private ownership, to appoint priests and rulers, and so on. As is the case with most other origin stories, the Buddhist one is essentially moralistic. For our purpose, the message on sexuality and procreation is clear: the sexual instinct is a "wantonness" that grows out of an innate craving to experience an enticing "other." The result is more of the same: procreation, the appearance of yet more "wanton" beings. A world ruled by desire has come about.

Although a subtle intuition of impropriety still, to this day, arises in connection with sexuality, in the course of time its "bad principle" is forgotten and sexual intercourse is approved and considered

necessary. People begin to depend on it to feel fulfilled. In the pleasure of sexual union the joy of a long-lost "self-luminosity" is dimly remembered. In a way, therefore, the Buddhist celibate monastic tradition attempts to recover man's asexual, desireless beginnings when he "fed on joy alone." The idea of going forth is to break a vicious cycle: sensual enjoyment involves cravings and attachments and other unwholesome psychological states that engross the mind, involve it in a universe of sensual objects, and trap it in a chain of physical births and deaths. Procreation therefore amounts to a spiritual blindness, a giving in to a primordial "bad principle." To glorify family life, as the Brahmins did, is to lead people astray. In one Buddhist sutta, Brahmin partiality towards large families and many sons is even portrayed as a wicked view advanced by Māra, "the Evil One." [3]

The Householder

Although going forth gives one the "best life," it is clear that the majority of beings are too caught up in their "enjoyment-earths" to be able to live the life of a monk or nun with no more than a begging bowl, a set of robes, and a shaving knife to call their own. The Buddha therefore advises the lay person to do the next

best thing: to curb his or her desires and reduce attachments and live as "blameless" a life as possible. This can be very difficult, embroiled as family people are in so many situations that incline them to do immoral things. Still, in practising virtue and generosity to the best of their abilities, householders can "gain merit." This is felt as a qualitative change of attitude in everything they do and results in improved rebirth conditions which enable them, eventually, to see through the allurements of desire objects (including the opposite sex) and to renounce them.

Although the Buddha had nothing specific to say about the size, composition, or limitation of the family unit, he had some definite advice to give on the type and quality of the *relationship* that should be fostered between the members of the family: between parents and children, husband and wife. I will interpret this advice to see whether it has relevance to population growth and family planning in the modern era.

The Buddha considered the family environment a most precious circumstance and opportunity for spiritual growth, second only to going forth. To be born in a certain family results from a special type of karma. A karmic relationship therefore exists between the parents and their child even before the moment of conception. This karmic link intensifies from the moment of birth and expresses itself in the

relationship that parents and children establish between themselves within the family unit.

The parent-child relationship is the basis of human society. From it flow all the other types of interpersonal and community associations. In the well-known Sigalovāda Sutta these relationships are conceived of as extending in all "directions." To the "East" are one's parents and to the "West" one's wife (or husband) and children. This is the main axis in a multidimensional pattern of relationships. To the "South" are one's teachers and to the "North" one's friends, relatives, and neighbours. "Below" are one's employees, servants, and workers and "above" are religious men and recluses. In the sutta, the Buddha sets out how these six quarters may be "protected." He first enumerates the four "evil deeds" and "sinful actions" that must be avoided and adds "six courses leading to the loss of one's wealth" and a host of other "indulgences" and "wrong associations" that can bring "ruin" to the householder if he allows himself to fall prey to them.

The Sigalovāda Sutta is an impressive piece of practical advice that is intended to make the family man not only "wise and virtuous" but also "prosperous": "To him gathering wealth as a bee collects honey, wealth accumulates as an anthill is heaped up gradually." The accumulation of wealth is,

in fact, the result of being virtuous and wise. It is a karmic consequence. Stress is laid on the wise administration of one's income and assets: "Thus after gathering wealth, the layman able to lead a household life should divide his wealth into four parts. Thereby, indeed, does he make good associations. Let him enjoy one portion. Let him use two to conduct his business. Let him save the fourth portion for times of distress." I have quoted these lines at some length to make clear that the Buddha intended family life to be happy, prosperous, and secure. One must assume that he would approve of anything wise and virtuous that would ensure the welfare of the householder and his family, including such practises as may be appropriate to limit the size of the family unit itself if these proved necessary for the good of the family.

The sutta goes on to suggest ways to make the six directions "safe," i.e. how to establish wholesome links between oneself, one's immediate relatives, and the community in which one lives. As a child one makes the eastern direction safe by supporting one's parents and assuming trusteeship over the family's traditions, assets, and wealth. As a parent one directs one's children away from evil and towards what is good and noble; one educates them well and trains them in a trade or profession; one arranges suitable marriages for them, and "hands them their inheritance

in time."

An analysis of the other relationships is of no direct relevance to this discussion. The conclusion that can be drawn, however, is that the exercise of virtue and wisdom creates a harmonious and prosperous family environment which in turn becomes the foundation for a harmonious and prosperous society. This is important for the welfare of the monastic tradition as well: monks and nuns cannot exist without the goodwill and generosity of a reasonably well-to-do community of lay people. An awareness of this mutually beneficial interdependence is part of the Buddhist family ethic. One of the duties of a child is to give alms to the Sangha on behalf of his or her parents after their deaths. In this way, interfamily loyalty and support is directly linked to the well-being of those who have renounced family life.

The Buddha does not prescribe a particular size or inner composition of the family unit. He leaves the question of monogamy, polygamy, or polyandry open. He does not advocate a large or small number of children. He does not praise male off-spring above female or vice versa. These are questions which are left for the householder to decide, and hopefully he will make the right decisions in the circumstances in which he finds himself. But just as there are many things a householder can do to create propitious

family and social conditions, so there are many wrong courses of action that can destroy them. In principle, actions which are done through greed, hate, fear, and ignorance must be avoided. Following this advice one would not, if one were wise and virtuous, have a large family simply because one desired to have many sons, or because it is supposed to give one added social status, or because one believes children to be gifts of God. In the Buddhist view, that would be a demonstration of craving, pride, and delusion.

In addition, a large family may become an unbearable drain on one's wealth, making it impossible to fulfil one's responsibilities towards one's children (giving them a good education; being able to hand over an inheritance to them) and one's parents (supporting them; safeguarding what one has inherited from them). One may also neglect to attend to one's obligations towards the other "directions" of society: one may become so poor that one has become mean and unsupportive towards one's neighbours and friends, be unable to help in the upkeep of the Sangha, and so on. It would be the duty of those who have gone forth to remind lay society of the Buddha's wise words in this respect. But the Sangha cannot do more than that. So what is to be done if, for whatever reason, a population increases to an unmanageable size, threatening to destroy it by the sheer weight of

numbers?

The "Need" for Children

In secular life, children satisfy a number of needs psychological (or emotional) and social, practical (or economic) as well as religious. In archaic societies these needs tend to coincide. An intensive agricultural lifestyle, for instance, necessitates a large family to work the land, especially as one grows older. If, as is usual, such a lifestyle is coupled with a high mortality rate, it is natural to place a high value on fertility and off-spring. A large family is therefore both desired and necessary. As a result, fecundity is admired; it increases one's standing in society and is thought to be a spiritual blessing.

However, when a community advances from a predominantly rural, agricultural stage to an urban, industrial phase, these needs and their supporting conditions undergo some profound changes. The mortality rate is lowered. A large number of children becomes an economic burden instead of an asset. A couple's evaluation of what constitutes a satisfactory life may change as well. The wife, for instance, may find emotional fulfilment in working at a job outside the home instead of in her role as a domestic housewife and child-bearer. The family unit itself

tends to evolve from a cosanguineal "extended" familism to a conjugal one and—in "first world" civilizations—to an individualism that tends to override familial values altogether. Fertility control measures, if they apply at all, undergo similar changes: the practises of infanticide, prolonged lactation (or "spaced birth"), a ban on the re-marriage of widows, and sexual abstinence characteristic of peasant societies give way to a postponement of marriage and contraception in developing communities and institutionalised abortion and sterilisation programmes in modern countries.

While the practical need and economic relevance for children may therefore undergo great adjustments in the course of a community's history, the religious and emotional appraisal of off-spring as the fundamental constituent of a meaningful family life tends to remain relatively constant. Obviously this is where, sooner or later, changing attitudes and needs and practical issues and fixed spiritual evaluations must come into conflict with each other.

The emotional-psychological need for children is, as a rule, basic to the life of the family man and woman. The desire to get married is virtually synonymous with the wish to have children of one's own—at least until the relatively modern stage of individualism is reached when cohabitation no longer necessarily

involves either wedlock or procreation. The religious "needs" surrounding child birth are of a different nature. Religion should, in principle, be able to provide householders with a set of sound and dependable moral guidelines and meaningful integrative spiritual norms to enable a community to navigate its course through its various cultural transitions without breaking apart. Ideally, religious tenets should remain relevant no matter what changes are taking place or what phase of evolution a society is passing through.

However, this is rarely the case. When circumstances change and the practical and security needs for a large number of children diminish, the religious tenets that originally sanctioned and encouraged a high fertility rate tend to remain in force. They have acquired an inertia all of their own and are upheld as sacred, infallible, and unalterable. As a consequence, these beliefs continue to promote habits that might once have served the community well, but which are now acting against it.

Procreation and Religious Norms

As is clear from the description of the Buddha's attitude to family life and the place of the family in society, there are no dogmas in Buddhism that

influence its size or its functioning, only ethical guidelines. The householder is simply asked to fulfil certain caring duties towards his immediate family and, by extension, towards society at large, including those who have opted out the monks and nuns—so that the whole community can prosper.

This is the ideal situation. But it would be a miracle indeed if a nation, Buddhist or otherwise, could leave it entirely to each person to adjust his or her individual behaviour to suit the welfare of the entire community. Sooner or later a population, through its leaders, must develop collective solutions to problems that have come to affect it. In time, such solutions crystallise into pragmatic rules of behaviour that become part of that society's characteristic culture.

It is probably because Buddhist cultures tend to be unusually pragmatic that some of the most startling successes in resolving population pressures can be found in countries in which Buddhism has played a significant role. Japan, of course, is a prime example. When, in the 1950s, a need for lowering the fertility rate became particularly obvious, a public awareness campaign was started. It was stressed that life for its own sake, as a mere quantity, is of less value than a life that has quality and is satisfactory. This seemed a most reasonable argument to the Japanese and as a result Japan's birth rate was reduced from thirty-one

per thousand to seventeen per thousand within a period of twelve years.

This stabilisation of the population was achieved through state-sanctioned sterilisation and contraception programmes, a resettlement of populations, and legalised abortions. But a significant factor was also the willingness by the Japanese to postpone marriage. In 1955 the percentage of young Japanese women who married in their early twenties was half of what it was in 1920. Yet, at the age of forty, the percentage of never-married women in Japanese society is the lowest of any society in the world. So, in principle, the pleasures and value of family life—so highly valued in traditional Japanese society—are not being curtailed.

Other Buddhist countries have similarly shown a willingness to adopt effective population control measures to produce a better quality life for its natives. Within two years of introducing a birth-control programme in Taiwan, one-third of married women there were using some form of contraception. As a result, the reproduction rate of women over thirty years of age declined drastically. Since 1951, the birth-rate was reduced by an average of 2 percent per year.

In the People's Republic of China, pragmatic

Marxist policy and Buddhist social values have combined to make profound adjustments to the Confucian adage that held dying without offspring to be one of the three great "unfilial acts": "A man is envied for the number of descendants in the male line who will walk in his funeral train. Grandchildren and still more grandchildren are counted as special blessings from Heaven." Chinese couples are now rewarded in a number of ways when they postpone their marriage and delay the birth of their first child. If they keep their offspring down to two, they are upheld as examples of responsible citizens. Their social status increases and their job prospects are enhanced. Only their two first-born children are granted special educational privileges; these fall away with subsequent children. Exhibitions, films, and musicals show the advantages of a two-child family; contraceptive devices, sterilisation, and abortion are readily available.

Countries like Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand have also started to introduce methods of population control, but not very forcefully as, rightly or wrongly, they do not consider themselves to be under excessive population pressure. But any determined campaigns that have been conducted in these countries seem to have met with a ready response. For instance, in Sri Lanka, a Swedish mission managed to reduce the

birth-rate by one-third in some experimental villages in just a few years.

Buddhist Norms in Family Planning

In this section I will outline some Buddhist evaluations of measures advocated to reduce population pressures.

Contraception: In my view, a Buddhist need not have any qualms about practising medically safe forms of contraception, be they "natural" or "artificial." It is true that human sexuality is an experience that exists alongside of and interdependent with procreation, but that does not mean that there is an obligation to allow birth to occur as a result of sexual passion, just as there is no obligation to kill one's enemy because one hates him or steal something because one likes to possess it. One can experience human drives and emotions, but one need not necessarily channel them into their concrete manifestations. In the traditional Buddhist view, conception depends on three interdependent factors. [4] If any of them is missing, there can be no conception. Two of these factors are not under man's direct control: the "mother's season" and the "presence of the incoming being (*gandhabba*)." However, the third factor, coitus, is subject to the volition of the couple. While giving vent to their

sexuality, they can prevent insemination if they so wish.

Sterilisation: The observations made about contraception apply equally to sterilisation as the latter is, in effect, a permanent form of contraception open to the choice of the individual, who must live with the consequences of his actions (karma) whatever they may be, now or in the future.

Conjugal alternatives: There is nothing in particular in the Buddha's teachings that elevates one type of conjugal arrangement above another. It is the quality of interpersonal relationships that is important, whether a man has one wife or four, or whether the wife has her husband's three younger brothers as additional spouses. In principle, therefore, a Buddhist would have no objection to the adoption of alternative marital arrangement such as polyandry—if these offered a practical solution to population pressures. If it proved to be beneficial, a Buddhist community would also, in principle, have no religious objection to postponing marriage to a later age, or to delaying the birth of a married couple's first child, or to limiting the family unit to, say, two or three children.

Abstention and celibacy: In many Eastern countries, even when sexual activity is engaged in, restraint is encouraged as a form of religious discipline.

Continence, it is maintained, strengthens the will to resist instinctual urges of all kinds. It enables one to transmute one's base characteristics into divine qualities. If periodic sexual abstention and coital discipline is therefore strongly advocated, celibacy is an even higher ideal, particularly in its monastic context. A traditional Buddhist community would thus wish to make provision for maintaining a sizable monastic order to enable men and women to "go forth" from worldly society—and from procreation.

The effect of a well-established and widespread monastic tradition on the size and growth of a country's population can be quite considerable. Frugally-living celibate monks and nuns, of course, exert far less pressure on a community's resources than if they had become householders, with families of their own. It has long been an ideal in Buddhist countries to have at least one son or daughter from each family enter the Sangha. Until the Chinese take-over of their country, one out of every seven Tibetans, most of them men, was living in a monastery. To put this into perspective: it is estimated that India's population growth can be halved if only five young fathers or mothers out of every thousand underwent sterilisation. The same effect could be achieved if one out of two hundred joined a monastic order.

Abortion: In Buddhism, the question of abortion

does not involve any argument about whether or when a "soul" or an "individual" comes into being at any stage of pregnancy. These are concepts that are irrelevant in the Buddhist understanding of what constitutes existence. However, this does not make the problems surrounding the practise of abortion any less pressing. As I have discussed, what happens at conception is a coming together, through karmic action, of a number of interdependent psychic and physical conditions that make it possible, ultimately, for a birth to take place. In every respect a life has come into being at conception. Although this life may achieve its independent existence only at birth, this does not diminish the creatureliness of the foetus, or its specific status, from the karmic point of view, as a human being. [5] Therefore, even though abortion is widely practised and institutionalised in some Buddhist countries, and though there can be no dogmatic pronouncement that could cover all possible personal circumstances surrounding the occurrence of a conception, a Buddhist should seriously consider the profound karmic implications of an induced abortion.

Coercion to limit fecundity: As is clear from population control experiences gained in Japan and Taiwan, a Buddhist society tends to see the welfare of the individual, the family, and the entire community as closely interrelated. Therefore married couples

respond readily to family planning efforts when the benefits to the community and the individual are demonstrable, immediate, and tangible.

Many other birth-control programmes seem to have failed because they were too idealistic and because the supposed benefits (such as improved standards of living and job opportunities, better educational facilities, etc.) took so long to show themselves that the individual lost his motivation to support an idea that, in the short term, only seemed to deprive him of values which had always been important to him. While the better educated in a community may be forward looking and willing to implement much-needed social change, there is always an infinitely larger number of people who, however much they may be groping for a better life, tend to cling to what seems to them to be a logically consistent and reassuringly familiar system that is more immediately fulfilling and safer than the uncertain and intangible new order that is being promised for a far too distant future.

While it may be generally true to say that secondary education and economic prosperity cause fertility rates to decline, it is often impossible even to initiate effective higher education programmes or sophisticated industrial expansion while fecundity remains at a high level. The resources that are

available for these programmes tend to be swallowed up in mere subsistence projects in an effort to keep an ever-increasing population from simply starving to death and remaining illiterate. As is demonstrated in the way the Chinese population-control programme is structured, a couple practising some form of family planning should be able to experience the advantages of limiting the number of their children immediately. Some of the resources that would otherwise be spent on developing yet more stop-gap agricultural or industrial schemes would therefore be much more effectively spent on granting special benefits to two-child families so that they could instantly feel how birth control enhances the quality of life.

Development of "taste"

As already pointed out, in Buddhism great stress is laid on introducing quality in family relationships. This, by extension, results in the presence of quality within the community. It is the task of religion to inculcate two dimensions of quality or "taste" in secular life: the practise of virtue and the exercise of wisdom (which is understood to be the absence of ignorance, wrong views, and superstition, i.e. "right understanding" and "right attitude"). Flowing from these, as a necessary result, is the emergence of

prosperous circumstances: the "acquisition of wealth." These, it is felt, constitute the elements of a sound society.

Giving one's children a good education is an important priority in Buddhist family life. Education fosters enriched tastes and perspectives on life; one's evaluation of what constitutes worthwhile goals tends to undergo profound qualitative changes.

It has been found that the degree of fertility in any community is related not merely to levels of income and rates of consumption, but also, interdependently, to people's "tastes." [6] Generally, fecundity is high in economically destitute communities, but it is even higher when that community's tastes are particularly low. Interestingly, fertility rates increase even further when income in such a society rises while its tastes remain low: increased prosperity is immediately translated into what has always been the most captivating enterprise in life: procreation, lots of kids. One can see this kind of "tastelessness"—along with a number of others—in the lives of the "nouveau riche" of any society, primitive as well as modern. Fecundity is reduced only when the spectrum of taste begins to expand. In fact, fertility is lowest when tastes are very sophisticated but prosperity is low.

It may not be easy to establish a high level of taste in

an impoverished community. But it would be very short-sighted indeed to think that by sketching an ideal future and simply creating some additional job opportunities, expanding agricultural production and providing a modicum of education, one can bring about a useful fall in the birth rate. In fact, in the initial stages of such development and birth-control programmes, the opposite is likely to happen, serving to intensify the Malthusian dilemma. Clearly, the individual's psychological outlook, quality of taste, and perception of meaningful goals in life must be enhanced as well to make it both unnecessary and undesirable for him to try to find such a large degree of fulfilment through his offspring.

If development funds can ever stretch that far, secondary education can elevate taste. But religion is the taste-maker par excellence. It comes cheap and can set to work immediately if it had a mind to. Buddhism particularly has had a most astonishing civilising effect on the societies that have come under its sway. The Buddha's profound insights into the nature of human motivation and his ability to steer man away from mindless and unwholesome forms of behaviour towards enlightened and noble ways of living are self-evident, non-dogmatic, and pragmatic. His doctrine encourages one to have self-respect and to take charge of one's own spiritual emancipation. In the process, it

gives one the opportunity (and wisdom) to enhance one's own and one's society's quality of life—which clearly includes formulating an intelligent attitude towards procreation. Indeed, what is missing in population-control programmes is truly enlightened religious guidance that is both able and willing to free people from their self-destructive urges and outmoded superstitions—including even the religious ones.

Notes

1. Majjhima Nikāya No. 36; M I 240. [Back]
2. Dīgha Nikāya No. 27 [Back]
3. Suttanipāta, vv.18-34. [Back]
4. Majjhima Nikāya No. 38; M I 266. [Back]
5. According to the Vinaya, the code of monastic discipline, a monk who participates in an abortion is guilty of taking human life, an offence of defeat (*pārājika*) requiring expulsion from the Order. See I.B. Horner, *The Book of Discipline, Vol. I,* (London: Pali Text Society, 1938), pp.144-45. [Back]
6. G. Hawthorn, *The Sociology of Fertility* (London: Collier Macmillan, 1970), pp. 97 f. [Back]

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