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Buddhism and Social Action

An Exploration

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Ken Jones

Part One: The Fundamentals

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, to teaching and training, organised 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 shall 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 or '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 Dīgha Nikāya, it is clear that early Buddhists were very much concerned with the creation of social conditions favourable 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 Rāhula 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" (Rāhula, 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 a social order which flourished twenty-three centuries ago. The Buddhist householder of the Sigālovāda 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 favour 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 without 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

successively 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 wellbeing and, at the same time, as a noble ideal of service and 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 than 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 (*viparināma-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 of 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 experienced 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*) means 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 behaviour and thought are all 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 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."
>
> Aṅguttara Nikāya (*Gradual Sayings*)
> Fours, No. 186

> "By protecting oneself (e.g. morally), one protects others; by protecting others, one protects oneself."
>
> Saṃyutta Nikāya (*Kindred Sayings*), 47; Satipaṭṭhāna 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 behaviour patterns are created by the struggles of the individual human predicament. They condition the behaviour 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 civilisation. The young are socialised to their inherited culture. Consciously and unconsciously they assimilate the norms of the approved behaviour—

what is good, what is bad, and what is 'the good life' for that culture.

The social karma—the establishment of conditioned behaviour 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 they 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, characterised by greed and over-consumption, 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 organisation 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 organisation. 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 industrial 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 favour 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 ploughs, wells, irrigation systems and organised labour, what then will become of the spiritual life amongst all this busyness and conflict? We must next consider this fundamental question.

1.4 Is not a Buddhist's prime task to work on him- or herself? Answer: YES and NO

Buddhism is essentially pragmatic. Buddhism is, in one sense, something that one does. It is a guide to the

transformation of individual experience. In the traditional Buddhist teaching, the individual sets out with a karmic inheritance of established volitions, derived from his early life, from earlier lives and certainly from his social environment, a part of his karmic inheritance. Nevertheless, the starting point is the individual experiencing of life, here and now.

Our train of argument began with the anxiety, the profound sense of unease felt by the individual in his naked experience of life in the world when not masked by busyness, objectives, diversions and other confirmations and distractions. Buddhism teaches that all suffering—whether it be anxiety, or more explicitly karmic, brought-upon-ourselves-suffering, or 'external' suffering, accidental and inevitable through war, disease, old age and so on—arises ultimately from the deluded belief in a substantial and enduring self. In that case, what need has the individual Buddhist for concern for other individuals, let alone for social action since his prime task is to work on himself in order to dissolve this delusion? Can he only then help others?

The answer to these questions is both yes and no. This does not mean half-way between yes and no. It means yes and no. It means that the answer to these fundamental questions of Buddhist social action cannot ultimately be logical or rational. For the

Buddhist Middle Way is not the middle between two extremes, but the Middle Way which transcends the two extremes in a 'higher' unity.

Different traditions of Buddhism offer different paths of spiritual practice. But all depend ultimately upon the individual becoming more deeply aware of the nature of his experience of the world, and especially of other people and hence of himself and of the nature of this self. "To learn the way of the Buddha is to learn about oneself. To learn about oneself is to forget oneself. To forget oneself is to experience the world as pure object—to let fall one's own mind and body and the self-other mind and body" (Zen Master Dogen, *Shobogenzo*). Meditation both reveals and ultimately calms and clarifies the choppy seas and terrifying depths of the underlying emotional life. All the great traditions of spiritual practice, Buddhist and non-Buddhist, emphasise the importance of periods of withdrawal for meditation and reflection. Their relative importance is not our present concern. However, in all Buddhist traditions the training emphasises a vigilant mindfulness of mental feelings in the course of active daily life, as well as in periods of withdrawal. It also advocates the parallel development of habitual forms of ethical behaviour (*sīla*).

"We need not regard life as worth [either] boycotting

or indulging in. Life situations are the food of awareness and mindfulness… We wear out the shoe of saṃsāra by walking on it through the practice of meditation" (Chogyam Trungpa, 1976, p. 50). The same message comes across forcefully in the Zen tradition: "For penetrating to the depths of one's true nature… nothing can surpass the practice of Zen in the midst of activity… The power or wisdom obtained by practising Zen in the world of action is like a rose that rises from the fire. It can never be destroyed. The rose that rises from the midst of flames becomes all the more beautiful and fragrant the nearer the fire rages" (Zen Master Hakuin, 1971, p. 34).

It is open to us, if we wish, to extend our active daily life to include various possible forms of social action. This offers a strong immediate kind of experience to which we can give our awareness practice. Less immediately, it serves to fertilise our meditation —'dung for the field of bodhi.' Thirdly, it offers wider opportunities for the cultivation of sila—the habituation to a selfless ethic.

The above remarks are about taking social action. They refer to the potential benefits of social action for individual practice. They are less 'reasons' for social action than reasons why a Buddhist should not desist from social action. The mainspring of Buddhist social action lies elsewhere; it arises from the heart of a

ripening compassion, however flawed it still may be by ego needs. This is giving social action, with which we shall be concerned in the next section.

Social action as a training in self-awareness (and compassionate awareness of others) may be a discipline more appropriate to some individual temperaments, and, indeed, to some cultures and times, than to others. We are not concerned with advocating it for all Buddhists, but simply to suggesting its legitimacy for such as choose to follow it. For Buddhism has always recognised the diversity of individual temperaments and social cultures that exist, and has offered a corresponding diversity of modes of practice.

1.5 Buddhist social action as heartfelt paradox

As we have noted, the significance of social action as mindfulness training is, of course, incidental to that profound compassionate impulse which more or less leads us to seek the relief of the suffering of others. Our motives may be mixed, but to the extent that they are truly selfless they do manifest our potential for Awakening and our relatedness to all beings.

Through our practice, both in the world and in withdrawn meditation, the delusion of a struggling self becomes more and more transparent, and the conflicting opposites of good and bad, pain and pleasure, wealth and poverty, oppression and freedom are seen and understood in a Wisdom at once serene and vigilant. This Wisdom partakes of the sensitivity of the heart as well as the clarity of thought.

In this Wisdom, in the words of R.H. Blyth, things are beautiful—but not desirable; ugly—but not repulsive; false—but not rejected. What is inevitable, like death, is accepted without rage; what may not be, like war, is the subject of action skilful and the more effective because, again, it is not powered and blinded by rage and hate. We may recognise an oppressor and resolutely act to remove the oppression, but we do not hate him. Absence of hatred, disgust, intolerance or righteous indignation within us is itself a part of our growth towards enlightenment (*bodhi*).

Such freedom from negative emotions should not be mistaken for indifference, passivity, compromise, loving our enemy instead of hating him, or any other of these relativities. This Wisdom transcends the Relativities which toss us this way and that. Instead, there is an awareness, alert and dispassionate, of an infinitely complex reality, but always an awareness free of despair, of self-absorbing aggression, or of

blind dogma, an awareness free to act or not to act. Buddhists have their preferences, and in the face of such social cataclysms as genocide and nuclear war, they are strong preferences, but they are not repelled into quietism by them. What has been said above has to be cultivated to perfection by one following the Bodhisattva ideal. We are inspired by it, but very few of us can claim to live it. Yet we shall never attain the ideal by turning our backs upon the world and denying the compassionate Buddha nature in us that reaches out to suffering humanity, however stained by self love those feelings may be. Only through slowly 'wearing out the shoe of samsara' in whatever way is appropriate to us can we hope to achieve this ideal, and not through some process of incubation.

This Great Wisdom (*prajñā*) exposes the delusion, the folly, sometimes heroic, sometimes base, of human struggle in the face of many kinds of suffering. This sense of folly fuses with the sense of shared humanity in the form of compassion (*karuṇā*). Compassion is the everyday face of Wisdom.

In individual spiritual practice though, some will incline to a Way of Compassion and others to a Way of Wisdom, but finally the two faculties need to be balanced, each complementing and ripening the other.

He who clings to the Void

And neglects Compassion
Does not reach the highest stage.
But he who practises only Compassion
Does not gain release from the toils of existence.

Saraha, 1954

To summarise, Buddhist or non-Buddhist, it is our common humanity, our 'Buddha nature,' that moves us to compassion and to action for the relief of suffering. These stirrings arise from our underlying relatedness to all living things, from being brothers and sisters one to another. Buddhist spiritual practice, whether at work or in the meditation room, ripens alike the transcendental qualities of Compassion and Wisdom.

Social action starkly confronts the actor with the sufferings of others and also confronts him with his own strong feelings which commonly arise from such experience, whether they be feelings of pity, guilt, angry partisanship or whatever. Social action is thus a powerful potential practice for the follower of the Way, a 'skilful means' particularly relevant to modern society.

Finally, it is only some kind of social action that can be an effective and relevant response to the weight of social karma which oppresses humanity and which we

all share.

Part Two: The Action

2.1 Giving and helping

All social action is an act of giving (*dāna*), 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 defence of the principles of a national health service?

The old phrase 'as cold as charity' recalls the 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 organisations 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 recognise 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 offences 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 to Buddhism, and with the general publicising of Buddhism among non-Buddhists.

Buddhism is by its very nature lacking in the aggressive evangelising 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 endeavour. 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 proselytising 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) publicising the Dhamma, and (b) introductory teaching for enquirers whose 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 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 organisations 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 organisations. It would also provide a general information clearing house for all the groups and organisations 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 organisations 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 centres 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 programme 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 centres 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; sometimes he 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 senses than one leave little space for the learner. It will also 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 summarise and consolidate what has been learnt. Dharma teachers must master the art 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 organisations in different parts of the world. They are the heart, for example, of the Japanese mass organisation 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 emphasises 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 *sīla*.

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, firstly, in the direct relief of non-volitionally caused suffering now and in the future, and, secondly, with the creation of social karmic conditions favourable to the following of the Way that leads to the cessation of volitionally caused suffering and 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 organisations 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 organisations 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 'skilful 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 organisation 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 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 organisation. It may be the unsought-for leadership of an action group protesting

against the closing of an old people's day care centre. It may be the organising 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.

2.4 Buddhist political theory and policy

Buddhism and politics meet at two levels—theory and practice. Buddhism has no explicit body of social and political theory comparable to its psychology or metaphysics. Nevertheless, a Buddhist political theory can be deduced primarily from basic Buddhism, from Dharma. Secondarily, it can be deduced from the general orientation of scriptures which refer explicitly to a bygone time. We have already argued, however,

that this can be done only in a limited and qualified way.

Whatever form it may take, Buddhist political theory like other Buddhist 'theory' is just another theory. As it stands in print, it stands in the world of the conditioned; it is of samsara. It is its potential, its spiritual implications, which make it different from 'secular' theory. When skilfully practised, it becomes a spiritual practice. As always, Buddhist 'theory' is like a label on a bottle describing the contents which sometimes is mistaken for the contents by zealous label-readers. In that way we can end up with a lot of politics and very little Buddhism.

This is not to decry the value of a Buddhist social and political theory—only its misuse. We have only begun to apply Buddhism as a catalyst to the general body of Western social science and most of the work so far has been in psychology. Such work in allied fields could be extremely helpful to Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike.

The writings of some Buddhists from Sri Lanka, Burma and elsewhere offer interesting examples of attempts to relate Buddhism to nationalism and Marxism (not to be confused with communism). Earlier in the century Anāgārika Dharmapāla stressed the social teaching of the Buddha and its value in

liberating people from materialistic preoccupations. U Nu, the eminent Burmese Buddhist statesman, argued that socialism follows naturally from the ethical and social teachings of the Buddha, and another Burmese leader, U Ba Swe, held that Marxism is relative truth, Buddhism absolute truth. This theme has been explored more recently in Trevor Ling's book *Buddha, Marx and God*, (2nd ed., Macmillan, London 1979) and Michal Edwardes's *In the Blowing out of a Flame* (Allen & Unwin 1976). Both are stimulating and controversial books. E.F. Schumacher's celebrated book *Small is Beautiful* (Blond & Briggs, London 1973) has introduced what he terms 'Buddhist economics' and its urgent relevance in the modern world to many thousands of non-Buddhists. Of this we shall say more in a later section on the Buddhist 'good society.'

Buddhist social and political theory and policy can only be mentioned in passing in this pamphlet, although we have earlier introduced the idea of 'social karma' as of central importance. We are, instead, concerned here with problems and questions arising in the practice of social and political work by Buddhists and the nature of that work.

2.5 Conflict and partisanship

The Buddhist faced with political thought, let alone political action, is straightaway plunged into the turbulent stream of conflict and partisanship and right and wrong.

Let the reader, perhaps prompted by the morning newspaper, select and hold in his mind some particular controversial public issue or public figure. Now, how does your Buddhism feel, please? (No, not what does your Buddhism think!) How does it feel when, again, some deeply held conviction is roughly handled at a Buddhist meeting or in a Buddhist journal? "The tears and anguish that follow arguments and quarrels," said the Buddha, "the arrogance and pride and the grudges and insults that go with them are all the result of one thing. They come from having preferences, from holding things precious and dear. Insults are born out of arguments and grudges are inseparable from quarrels." (Kalahavivāda-sutta, trans. H. Saddhatissa, 1978, para. 2) Similarly, in the words of one of the Zen patriarchs: "The conflict between longing and loathing is the mind's worst disease" (Seng Ts'an, 1954).

In all our relationships as Buddhists we seek to cultivate a spirit of openness, cooperation, goodwill and equality. Nonetheless, we may not agree with another's opinions, and, in the final analysis, this divergence could have to do even with matters of life

and death. But hopefully we shall be mindful and honest about how we think and how we feel, and how our opponent thinks and feels. In such controversies, are we each to confirm our own ego? Or each to benefit from the other in the search for wise judgment? Moreover, in the words of the Dalai Lama, "when a person criticises you and exposes your faults, only then are you able to discover your faults and make amends. So your enemy is your greatest friend because he is the person who gives you the test you need for your inner strength, your tolerance, your respect for others… Instead of feeling angry with or hatred towards such a person, one should respect him and be grateful to him" (Dalai Lama, 1976, p. 9). We are one with our adversary in our common humanity; we are two in our divisive conflict. We should be deluded if we were to deny either—if we were to rush either to compromise or to uncompromising struggle. Our conflict and our humanity may be confirmed or denied at any point along that line of possibilities which links the extremes, but ultimately it will be resolved in some other, less explicit sense. Sangharakshita expresses this paradox in his observation that "it is not enough to sympathise with something to such an extent that one agrees with it. If necessary, one must sympathise to such an extent that one disagrees" (Sangharakshita, 1979, p. 60).

Zen Master Dogen has advised, “When you say something to someone, he may not accept it, but do not try to make him understand it rationally. Don’t argue with him; just listen to his objections, until he himself finds something wrong with them.” Certainly we shall need much time and space for such wisdom and compassion as may inform us in such situations. If we do fight, may our wisdom and compassion honour both our adversary and ourselves, whether in compromise, victory or defeat.

And so,

> “On how to sing
> The frog school and the skylark school
> Are arguing.”
>
> Shiki, 1958, p. 169

2.6 Ambiguity, complexity, uncertainty

Our ’Small Mind’ clings to delusions of security and permanence. It finds neither of these in the world where, on the contrary, it experiences a sense of ambiguity, complexity and uncertainty which it finds intolerable, and which make it very angry when it is

obliged to confront them. 'Small Mind' prefers to see social, economic and political phenomena in terms of black and white, or 'Left and Right.' It likes to take sides, and it clings to social dogmas both sophisticated and simple. ("The rich/poor are always selfish/idle.")

To the extent that we have achieved 'Big Mind' we perceive with equanimity what 'Small Mind' recoils from as intolerable. We are freer to see the world as it is in all the many colours of the rainbow, each merging imperceptibly into the next. In place of clinging to a few black, white and grey compartments, scrutiny is freed, encouraged by the Buddha's discriminating and differentiating attitude (Vibhajjavāda; see Wheel: No. 238/240, Aṅguttara Anthology, Part III, pp. 59 ff.)

We shall not be surprised then that the personal map which guides the Wise through social and political realities may turn out to be disturbingly unconventional. Their reluctance readily to 'take sides' arises not from quietism or an attachment to compromise or a belief in the 'unreality' of conflict, as is variously the case with those guided by mere rules. On the contrary, they may not even sit quietly, throwing soothing generalisations into the ring, as is expected of the religious. This seemingly uncomfortable, seemingly marginal stance simply reflects a reality which is experienced with

equanimity.

However, it does not require much equanimity to discover the deeper truths which underlie many current conventional truths. Conventional politics, for example, run from 'left' to 'right,' from radicals through liberals and conservatives to fascists. But this is much too simple. Some radicals are, for example, as dogmatic and authoritarian in practice as fascists, and to their ultimate detriment they hate no less mightily. And, again, some conservatives are equally dogmatic because of an awareness of the subtle, organic nature of society and hence the danger of attempts at 'instant' restructuring.

Similarly an ideology such as Marxism may be highly complex but has been conveniently oversimplified even by quite well educated partisans, both those 'for' and those 'against' the theory. The present Dalai Lama is one of those who have attempted to disentangle 'an authentic Marxism,' which he believes is not without relevance to the problems of a feudal theocracy of the kind that existed in Tibet, from "the sort one sees in countless countries claiming to be Marxist," but which are "mixing up Marxism and their national political interests and also their thirst for world hegemony" (Dalai Lama, 1979).

The Wise person sees clearly because he does not

obscure his own light; he does not cast the shadow of himself over the situation. However, even an honest perception of complexity commonly paralyses action with "Yes, that's all very well, but… On the other hand it is also true that…". Contemplative wisdom is a precious thing, but true Wisdom reveals itself in positive action—or 'in-action.' Though a person may, through Clear Comprehension of Purpose (*satthaka-sampajañña*), keep loyal to the social ideal, his Clear Comprehension of (presently absent) Suitability may counsel in-action, or just 'waiting.'

In a social action situation the complexity and ambiguity to which we refer above is strongly felt as ethical quandary, uncertainty as to what might be the best course of action. Even in small organisations all power is potentially corrupting; the power wielder is soon lost in a thicket of relative ethics, of means and ends confused, of greater and lesser evils, of long term and short term goals. This is not a 'game.' It is the terrible reality of power, wealth and suffering in the world, and the confusion of good and delusion. It cannot be escaped; it can only be suffered through. We cannot refuse life's most difficult problems because we have not yet attained to Wisdom. We simply have to do our mindful and vigilant best, without guilt or blame. That is all we have to do.

2.7 Violence and non-violence

The First Precept of Buddhism is to abstain from taking life. But it must be made clear that the Buddhist 'Precepts' are not commandments; they are 'good resolutions,' sincere aspirations voluntarily undertaken. They are signposts. They suggest to us how the truly Wise behave, beyond any sense of self and other.

Evil springs from delusion about our true nature as human beings, and it takes the characteristic forms of hatred, aggression and driving acquisitiveness. These behaviours feed upon themselves and become strongly rooted, not only in individuals but in whole cultures. Total war is no more than their most spectacular and bloody expression. In Buddhism the cultivation of *sila* (habitual morality) by attempting to follow the Precepts is an aspiration towards breaking this karmic cycle. It is a first step towards dissolving the egocentricity of headstrong wilfulness, and cultivating heartfelt awareness of others. The Precepts invite us to loosen the grip, unclench the fist, and to aspire to open-handedness and open-heartedness. Whether, and to what extent, he keeps the Precepts is the responsibility of each individual. But he needs to be fully aware of what he is doing.

The karmic force of violent behaviour will be affected by the circumstances in which it occurs. For example, a 'diminished responsibility' may be argued in the case of conscripts forced to kill by an aggressive government. And there is surely a difference between wars of conquest and wars of defence. Ven. Walpola Rāhula describes a war of national independence in Sri Lanka in the 2nd century BC conducted under the slogan "Not for kingdom but for Buddhism," and concludes that "to fight against a foreign invader for national independence became an established Buddhist tradition, since freedom was essential to the spiritual as well as the material progress of the community" (Rāhula, 1978, p. 117). We may deplore the historic destruction of the great Indian Buddhist heritage in the middle-ages, undefended against the Mongol and Muslim invaders. It is important to note, however, that "according to Buddhism there is nothing that can be called a 'just war'—which is only a false term coined and put into circulation to justify and excuse hatred, cruelty, violence and massacre" (Rāhula, 1967, p. 84).

It is an unfortunate fact, well documented by eminent scholars such as Edward Conze and Trevor Ling, that not only have avowedly Buddhist rulers undertaken violence and killing, but also monks of all traditions in Buddhism. Nonetheless, Buddhism has no history of

specifically religious wars, that is, wars fought to impose Buddhism upon reluctant believers.

Violence and killing are deeply corrupting in their effect upon all involved, and Buddhists will therefore try to avoid direct involvement in violent action or in earning their living in a way that, directly or indirectly, does violence. The Buddha specifically mentioned the trade in arms, in living beings and flesh.

The problem is whether, in today's 'global village,' we are not all in some degree responsible for war and violence to the extent that we refrain from any effort to diminish them. Can we refrain from killing a garden slug and yet refrain, for fear of 'political involvement,' from raising a voice against the nuclear arms race or the systematic torture of prisoners of conscience in many parts of the world?

These are questions which are disturbing to some of those Buddhists who have a sensitive social and moral conscience. This is understandable. Yet, a well-informed Buddhist must not forget that moral responsibility, or karmic guilt, originate from a volitional and voluntary act affirming the harmful character of the act. If that affirmation is absent, neither the responsibility for the act, nor karmic guilt, rest with those who, through some form of pressure,

participate in it. A slight guilt, however, might be involved if such participants yield too easily even to moderate pressure or do not make use of 'escape routes' existing in these situations. But failure to protest publicly against injustice or wrong-doings does not necessarily constitute a participation in evil. Voices of protest should be raised when there is a chance that they are heard. But 'voices in the wilderness' are futile, and silence, instead, is the better choice. It is futile, indeed, if a few well-meaning heads try to run against walls of rock stone that may yield only to bulldozers. It is a sad fact that there are untold millions of our fellow-humans who do affirm violence and use it for a great variety of reasons (though not 'reasonable reasons'!). They are unlikely to be moved by our protests or preachings, being entirely obsessed by divers fanaticisms or power urges. This has to be accepted as an aspect of existential suffering. Yet there are still today some opportunities and nations where a Buddhist can and should work for the cause of peace and for reducing violence in human life. No efforts should be spared to convince people that violence does not solve problems or conflicts.

The great evil of violence is its separation unto death of us and them, of 'my' righteousness and 'your' evil. If you counter violence with violence you will deepen that separation through thoughts of bitterness and

revenge. The Dhammapada says: "Never by hatred is hatred appeased, but it is appeased by kindness. This is an eternal truth" (I, 5). Buddhist non-violent social action (*avihiṃsa, ahiṃsa*) seeks to communicate, persuade and startle by moral example. "One should conquer anger through kindness, wickedness through goodness, selfishness through charity, and falsehood through truthfulness" (Dhammapada, XVII, 3).

The Buddha intervened personally on the field of battle, as in the dispute between the Sakyas and Koliyas over the waters of the Rohiṇī. Since that time, history has provided us with a host of examples of religiously inspired non-violent social action, skilfully adapted to particular situations. These are worthy of deep contemplation.

Well known is Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent struggle against religious intolerance and British rule in India, and also the Rev. Martin Luther King's black people's civil rights movement in the United States. A familiar situation for many people today is the mass demonstration against authority, which may be conducted either peacefully or violently. As Robert Aitken Gyoun Roshi has observed, "the point of disagreement, even the most fundamental disagreement, is still more superficial than the place of our common life." He recalls the case of a friend who organised an anti-nuclear demonstration at a naval

base passing through a small town in which virtually every household had at least one person who gained his livelihood by working at the base. Consequently, when the friend visited every single house before the demonstration he hardly expected to win the people over to his cause. But he did convince them that he was a human being who was willing to listen to them and who had faith in them as human beings. "When we finally had our demonstration, with four thousand people walking through this tiny community, nobody resisted us, nobody threw rocks. They just stood and watched" (*The Ten Directions,* Los Angeles Zen Centre, 1 (3) Sept. 1980, p. 6).

And yet again, situations may arise in which folly is mutually conditioned, but where we must in some sense take sides in establishing the ultimate responsibility. If we do not speak out then, we bow only to the conditioned and accept the endlessness of suffering and the perpetuation of evil karma. The following lines were written a few days after Archbishop Oscar Romero, of the Central American republic of El Salvador, had been shot dead on the steps of his chapel. Romero had roundly condemned the armed leftist rebel factions for their daily killings and extortions. However, he also pointed out that these were the reactions of the common people being used as "a production force under the management of

a privileged society… The gap between poverty and wealth is the main cause of our trouble… And sometimes it goes further: it is the hatred in the heart of the worker for his employer… If I did not denounce the killings and the way the army removes people and ransacks peasants' homes I should be acquiescing in the violence" (*Observer* newspaper (London), 30 March, 1980).

Finally there is the type of situation in which the truly massive folly of the conflict and of the contrasting evils may leave nothing to work with and there is space left only for personal sacrifice to bear witness to that folly. Such was the choice of the Buddhist monks who burnt themselves to death in the Vietnam war—surely one of the most savage and despairing conflicts of modern times, in which an heroic group of Buddhists had for some time struggled in vain to establish an alternative 'third force.'

2.8 The good society

The social order to which Buddhist social action is ultimately directed must be one that minimises 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 an on offer.

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

(a) Help people to overcome ego-centredness, through co-operation with others, in place of either subordination and exploitation or the consequent sense of 'righteous' struggle against these 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 harmonise 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 decentralised society, with co-operative management and ownership of productive wealth. It would be conceived on a human scale, whether in terms of size and complexity of organisation 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.

2.9 Organising social action

A systematic review of the different kinds of Buddhist

organisation for social action which have appeared in different parts of the world is beyond the scope of this pamphlet. Some considerable research would be required and the results would merit at least a separate pamphlet.

Later we shall introduce three contrasting movements which are, in some sense or other, examples of Buddhist social action. Each is related more or less strongly to the particular social culture in which it originated, and all should therefore be studied as illustrative examples-in-context and not necessarily as export models for other countries. They are, however, very suggestive, and two of the three have spread beyond their country of origin.

But first, let us identify some issues for an organisational approach to social action.

2.9a Maintaining balance

Social action needs to be organised and practised in such a way as to build upon its potential for spiritual practice and to guard against its seductions. Collective labour with fellow-Buddhists raises creative energy, encourages positive attitudes and engenders a strong spirit of fellowship. The conflicts, disagreements, obstacles, and discouragements which will certainly be met along the way offer rich meditation

experiences and opportunity for personal growth, so long as a scrupulous mindfulness is sustained.

The meditator will learn as much about himself in a contentious meeting as he will in the meditation hall. Both kinds of experience are needed, and they complement one another. Social action is a great ripener of compassion (for self as well as for others), out of the bitterness of the experiences which it commonly offers. Yet, like nothing else, it can stir up the partisan emotions and powerfully exult the opinionated ego. The busy, patronising evangelist not only gives an undercover boost to his own ego; he also steals another person's responsibility for himself. However, these dangers are, comparatively speaking, gross and tangible when set against the no less ego-enhancing seduction of Other-Worldliness and dharma-ridden pietism. Such 'spiritual materialism,' as Chogyam Trungpa calls it, has long been recognised as the ultimate and most elusive kind of self-deception which threatens the follower of the spiritual path.

The seduction lies in being carried away by our good works, in becoming subtly attached to the new goals and enterprises we have set ourselves, so that no space is left in our busily structured hours in which some saving strength of the spirit can abide. Here is opportunity to learn how to dance with time—"the

river in which we go fishing," as Thoreau called it, instead of neatly packaging away our lives in it, or letting it dictate us. And in committee lies the opportunity of slowly turning the hot, lusty partisanship of self-opinionated confirmation into the kind of space and dialogue in which we can communicate, and can even learn to love our most implacable opponents.

It is therefore important that both the individual and the group set aside regular periods for meditation, with periods of retreat at longer intervals. It is important also that experiences and the feel of the social action project should as far as possible be shared openly within the Buddhist group.

In our view, the first social action of the isolated Buddhist is not to withhold the Dharma from the community in which he or she lives. However modest one's own understanding of the Dharma, there is always some first step that can be taken and something to be learnt from taking that step. Even two or three can be a greater light to one another, and many forms of help are often available from outside such as working together through a correspondence course, for example, or listening to borrowed audiocassettes.

For the reasons given earlier it is important that social

action projects should, where possible, be undertaken by a Buddhist group rather than each individual 'doing his own thing.' And since the Buddhist group will, in most Western countries, be small and isolated, it is important that the work be undertaken in co-operation with like-minded non-Buddhists. This will both use energies to better effect since social action can be very time- and energy-consuming, and create an even better learning situation for all involved. Forms of social action which are high on explicit giving of service and low on conflict and power situations will obviously be easier to handle and to 'give' oneself to, though still difficult in other respects. For example, organising and participating in a rota of visits to lonely, long-stay hospital patients would contrast, in this respect, with involvement in any kind of local community development project.

2.9b Spiritual centres: example and outreach

In this section we are concerned with the significance of Buddhist residential communities both as manifestations and examples of the 'good society' and as centres of social outreach (mainly, though not solely, in the form of teaching the Dharma). We may distinguish four possible kinds of activity here.

In the first place, any healthy spiritual community does, by its very existence, offer to the world a living example not only of the Good Life but also of the Good Society. Certain spiritual values are made manifest in its organisation and practice in a way not possible in print or in talk. On the other hand, the purely contemplative and highly exclusive community can do this only in some limited, special and arguable sense.

In the second place, where the members of such a community undertake work as a community in order to sustain their community economically ('Right Livelihood'), then to that extent the community becomes a more realistic microcosm of what has to be done in the wider world and a more realistic model and example of how it might best be done.

Thirdly, such communities are commonly teaching and training communities. This may be so in formal terms, in that they offer classes and short courses and also longer periods of training in residence, in which the trainees become veritable community members. And it may be true in terms of the 'openness' of the community to outsiders who wish for the present to reserve their formal commitment, but who wish to open up their communication with the community through some participation in work, ritual, teaching, meditation.

Fourthly, the community might involve itself in various kinds of outside community service, development or action beyond that of teaching, and beyond the necessarily commercial services which may sustain the community's 'Right Livelihood.' Examples might be running a hospice for the terminally ill, providing an information and advice centre on a wide range of personal and social problems for the people of the local community, and assisting—and maybe leading—in various aspects of development of a socially deprived local community. The spiritual community thus becomes more strongly a community within a community. In this kind of situation would the spiritual community draw strength from its service to the social, the 'lay' community, creating an upward spiral of energy? Or would the whole scheme founder through the progressive impoverishment and corruption of the spiritual community in a vicious downward spiral?

In the Eastern Buddhist monastic tradition the first and third aspects (above) are present. In contrast to Christian monasticism, monks are not necessarily expected to be monks for life, and the monasteries may have an important function as seminaries and as long and short stay teaching and training centres. On the other hand, economically such communities are commonly strongly sustained by what is

predominantly a Buddhist society. In the West there are now similar communities in all the main Buddhist traditions. Although these are to some extent sustained also by lay Buddhist contributions, their income from training and teaching fees may be important. And whether it is or not, it is clear that their actual and potential training and teaching role is likely to be very important in non-Buddhist societies in which there is a growing interest in Buddhism. A good example is the Manjusri Institute in the United Kingdom, which is now seeking official recognition for the qualifications which it awards, and which could eventually become as much part of the national education system as, say, a Christian theological college. Such an integration of Buddhist activity into the pattern of national life in the West is, of course, most welcome, and opens up many new opportunities for making the Dharma more widely understood.

The above developments may be compared with the communities which form the basis of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO). In these, our second aspect (above), that of Right Livelihood, is found, in addition to the first and third.

The FWBO was founded in 1967 in the United Kingdom by the Ven. Maha Sthavira Sangharakshita, a Londoner who spent twenty years in India as a Buddhist monk and returned with the conviction that

the perennial Buddhism always expresses itself anew in each new age and culture. The FWBO is concerned with building what it calls the 'New Society' in the minds and practice of its members. Opening the FWBO's London Buddhist Centre, Ven. Sangharakshita was reported as saying that the New Society was a spiritual community composed of individuals who are "truly human beings: self-aware, emotionally positive people whose energies flow freely and spontaneously, who accept responsibility for their own growth and development, in particular by providing three things: firstly, a residential spiritual community; secondly, a co-operative Right Livelihood situation; and thirdly a public centre, offering classes, especially in meditation" (Marichi, 1979).

The FWBO does in fact follow a traditional Mahayana spiritual practice, but within this framework it does have, as the quotation above suggests, a strong Western flavour. This owes much to the eleven co-operatives by which many of the eighteen autonomous urban communities support themselves. These businesses are run by teams of community members as a means of personal and group development. They include a printing press, graphic design business, photographic and film studio, metalwork forge, and shops and cafes.

Membership of the communities (which are usually single sex) varies between four and thirty people, and often the community members pool their earnings in a 'common purse.' The FWBO comprises Order members, Mitras (who have made some initial commitment) and Friends (supporters in regular contact). Each community is autonomous and has its own distinctive character. Attached to communities are seven Centres, through which the public are offered talks, courses and instruction in meditation. Regular meetings of Chairmen of Centres and other senior Order members, supported by three central secretariats, are planned for the future, but it is not intended to abridge the autonomy of the constituent communities, each of which is a separately registered legal body.

The FWBO is growing very rapidly, not only in the United Kingdom but also overseas, with branches in Finland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Australia, the USA, and, interestingly, in India, where a sustained effort is being made to establish centres.

2.9c Community services and development

We refer in this section to the fourth aspect distinguished early in the previous section 2.9b,

namely, various possible kinds of service and support which may be given by organised Buddhists to the local community in which they live. The FWBO does not undertake this kind of activity (see previous section for examples), and in fact there do not appear to be any major examples of it in the West.

Arguably if this kind of work is undertaken at all, it might more likely be initiated by a non-residential 'lay' Buddhist group, whose members as householders and local workers may have strong roots in their town or neighbourhood. As an example of what can be achieved by a relatively small group of this kind, we quote the following (from *The Middle Way,* 54 (3) Autumn 1979, p. 193):

"The Harlow Buddhist Society has recently opened Dana House, a practical attempt to become involved with the ordinary people of the town and their problems. The new centre… has four regular groups using it. The first is an after-care service for those who have been mentally or emotionally ill. The centre is there for those in need of friendship and understanding. The second group is a psychotherapy one, for those with more evident emotional problems. It is run by an experienced group leader and a psychologist who can be consulted privately. The third group is a beginners' meditation class based on the concept of 'Right Understanding.' The fourth

group is the Buddhist group, which is not attached to any particular school of Buddhism.

"Peter Donahoe writes: 'We have endeavoured to provide a centre which can function in relation to a whole range of different needs, a place of charity and compassion, where all are welcomed regardless of race, colour, sex or creed, welcomed to come to terms with their suffering in a way which is relative to each individual.'"

However, on the whole, it is only in the East, in societies in which Buddhist culture is predominant or important, that there are sufficiently committed Buddhists to play a part in extensive community service and development projects. For example, in Japan there are several such movements and we shall refer in the next section to one example—Soka Gakkai, a movement which also plays a number of other roles. We must first, however, turn our attention to a pre-eminent example of a Buddhist-inspired movement for community development, the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement of Sri Lanka.

'Sarvodaya' means 'awakening of all' and 'Shramadana' means 'sharing of labour,' making a gift of time, thought and energy. This well describes what is basically a village self-help movement, inspired by Buddhist principles and founded in 1958 as part of a

general national awakening. It is now by far the largest non-governmental, voluntary organisation in Sri Lanka.

The Movement learned in its earliest days how very important non-economic factors are in community development, and its projects combine spiritual-cultural with socioeconomic development. "One important element that cannot be improved upon in Buddhist villages in particular is the unique place of the temple and the Buddhist monk, the one as the meeting place, the other as the chief exponent of this entire process." (All quotations here are from the pamphlet *Ethos and Work Plan*, published by the Movement.) Founded on traditional culture, Sarvodaya Shramadana is ultimately "a non-violent revolutionary movement for changing man and society." At the same time it aims to retain the best in the traditional social and cultural fabric of the community.

Village development projects are undertaken on the initiative of the villagers themselves. To begin with, the community is made aware of the historic causes that led to the impoverishment and disintegration of the community and of its cultural and traditional values. Economic regeneration is only possible if there is a restoration of social values within the village. It is emphasised that the community itself must take the

initiative in removing obstacles to development and in learning the new skills needed to carry through a change of programme. The volunteers brought in to help serve only as a catalyst. Action is focussed initially on Shramadana Camps in which villagers and outside volunteers work together upon some community project such as a road or irrigation channel. The experience of such Camps helps to develop a sense of community. Local leaders, working through village groups of farmers, of youth, of mothers and others, emerge to take increasing responsibility for a more or less comprehensive development programme. This may include pre-school care for the under-fives, informal education for adults, health care programmes, and community kitchens, with co-operation with State agencies as appropriate. By 1980, Sarvodaya was reaching 3,500 villages and was running 1,185 pre-schools.

Essential to these community development programmes is Sarvodaya Shramadana's system of Development Education programmes, operating through six Institutes and through the Gramodaya centres, each of which co-ordinates development work in some twenty to thirty villages. The movement also provides training in self-employment for the youth who compose the largest sector of the unemployed. Although the main thrust of activity has been in rural

areas, the Movement is also interested in urban community development where conditions are favourable and there is local interest.

The main material support for the movement comes from the villagers themselves, although financial and material assistance has also been received from overseas.

It is argued that the basic principles of Sarvodaya Shramadana can be adapted to developed as well as to developing countries, and Sarvodaya groups are already active in West Germany, the Netherlands, Japan and Thailand. "The rich countries also have to helped to change their purely materialistic outlook and strike a balance, with spiritual values added to the materialistic values of their own communities so that together all can build a new One World social order."

2.9d Political action and mass movements

Although there may be exceptional circumstances in certain countries, as a general rule there are strong arguments against Buddhist groups explicitly aligning themselves with any political party. It is not just that to do so would be irrelevantly divisive. As we have noted in section 2.6 (above), there are deeper,

underlying social and political realities which cross-cut the conventional political spectrum of left, right and centre.

Nevertheless, Buddhism, like other great religious systems, inevitably has political implications. To some extent these seem to be relatively clear, and in other senses they are arguable and controversial. Religion has its own contribution to make to politics and, ultimately, it is the only contribution to politics that really matters. It has failed both politically and as a religion if it falls either into the extreme of being debased by politics or of rejecting any kind of political involvement as a kind of fearful taboo. The fear of creating dissension among fellow Buddhists is understandable, but if Buddhists cannot handle conflict in a positive and creative way, then who can?

On closer examination we shall find that it is not 'politics' that requires our vigilance so much as the problems of power and conflict inherent in politics. Indeed, a better use of the term 'political' would be to describe any kind of power and conflict situation. In this sense a Buddhist organisation may be more intensely and unhappily 'political' in managing its spiritual and practical affairs than if and when its members are discussing such an 'outside' matter as conventional politics. Indeed, any such discussion of social and political questions may be banned by a

Buddhist society which may be in fact intensely political in terms of underlying power and conflict with which its members have not really come to terms. All kinds of organisations have problems of power and conflict and derive their positive dynamism from the good management of these, but the dangers of self-delusion seem to be greater in religious bodies.

When we meet Buddhists and get to know them, we find that even when they do not express explicit opinions on political and social matters, it is clear from other things they say that some are inclined to a conservative 'establishment' stance, some are of a radical inclination, and others more dissident still. Since the diversities of THIS and THAT exist everywhere else in the conditioned world, even Buddhists cannot pretend to exclude themselves from such disturbing distinctions. This is not really in question. What is in question is their ability to handle their differences openly and with Buddhist maturity. And, as we have tried to show earlier, this maturity implies a progressive diminution of emotional attachment to views about THIS and THAT, so that we no longer need either in order to sustain our identity in the world and have in some sense transcended our clinging by a higher understanding. We still carry THIS or THAT, but lightly and transparently and manageably—without ego-weight.

If we did not still carry them, how could we feel the Compassion for samsara, for ourselves as well as others?

Alan Watts wrote a suitably controversial little pamphlet on this subject, entitled *Beat Zen, Square Zen and Zen* (City Lights Books, San Francisco, 1959). The following passage may be found helpful to our present discussion; what the author has to say about Zen is surely no less applicable to Buddhism as a whole. Watts argues that the Westerner who wishes to understand Zen deeply "must understand his own culture so thoroughly that he is no longer swayed by its premises unconsciously. He must really have come to terms with the Lord God Jehovah and with his Hebrew-Christian conscience so he can take it or leave it without fear or rebellion. He must be free of the itch to justify himself. Lacking this, his Zen will be either 'beat' or 'square,' either a revolt from the culture and social order or a new form of stuffiness and respectability. For Zen is above all the liberation of the mind from conventional thought and this is something utterly different from rebellion against convention, on the one hand, or adapting foreign conventions, on the other."

In the West, individual Buddhists have been particularly attracted to pacifist, disarmament, and environmentalist movements and parties. These

movements have profound concerns, which, arguably, undercut the expediencies of conventional party politics. On the other hand, are they not made the more attractive by a certain political innocence, as yet uncorrupted and unblessed by the realities of power? And do they not also underestimate the karma of power and property?

However, in Western and other non-Buddhist countries Buddhist political action of any kind is little more than speculative. Buddhists are few in number, and their energies are necessarily fully occupied with learning and teaching. Teaching is the major form of social action and we have already discussed certain social action implications of the spiritual community. Social action at most verges upon certain possible kinds of service to the wider community or even participation in community development. We have already suggested the merit of such enterprises. But as to politics, using the word conventionally, in the West and at the present time, that can be no more than a matter for discussion in Buddhist groups. As always, individual Buddhists and perhaps informal groups will decide for themselves about political action or inaction.

However, in countries where there are strong Buddhist movements, well rooted in society, some kind of political stance and action seems unavoidable

and, indeed, logical and natural, though conventional party political alignments may generally be avoided.

For example, Sarvodaya Shramadana's success at the higher levels of village self-development depends on "the extent that unjust economic arrangements such as ownership of means of production, e.g., land in the hands of a few, administrative system and political power structures, are changed in such a way that the village masses become the true masters of their own selves and their environment. That the present government has gone very far in this direction is amply demonstrated when one examines the radical measures that have already been taken" (Sarvodaya Shramadana pamphlet *Ethos and Work Plan*, p. 31).

Large and explicitly Buddhist movements fill a variety of different roles, from the devotional to the so-called 'New Religions' which have become particularly important in Japan in the post-war period. (Some mention has already been made of the small discussion groups which are a notable feature of Rissho-Kosei-Kai—the 'Society for Establishing Righteousness and Family Relations'.) With their strong emphasis on pacifism, brotherly love, and mutual aid, these organisations have done much to assist the recovery of the Japanese people from the trauma of military aggression and the nuclear explosions which terminated it.

Soka Gakkai (literally, 'Value Creation Society') is perhaps the most striking of these Japanese Buddhist socio-political movements. It is a lay Buddhist organisation with over fifteen million adherents, associated with the Nichiren-Sho-Shu sect.

Soka Gakkai has an ambitious education and cultural programme, and has founded its own university, high school and hospital. It also has a political party, Komeito—the 'Clean Government Party,' which as early as 1967 returned twenty-five parliamentary candidates to the Japanese lower house, elected with five percent of the national vote. The party has continued to play an important part in Japanese political life, basing itself on "the principles of Buddhist democracy" and opposition to rearmament. Soka Gakkai is a populist movement, militant, evangelical and well organised, pledged to "stand forever on the side of the people" and to "devote itself to carrying out the movement for the human revolution" (President Daisaku Ikeda). More specifically, its political achievements have included a successful confrontation with the mine owners of Hokkaido.

Attitudes to Soka Gakkai understandably differ widely. It has been criticised by some for its radicalism and by others for its conservatism; certainly it has been criticised on the grounds of dogmatism and

aggressiveness. Certainly it is imbued with the nationalist fervour of Nichiren, the 13th century Buddhist monk who inspired it. Although it has some claims to missionary work in other countries, Soka Gakkai appears to have a more distinctive national flavour than the other social action groups we have looked at and to be less suitable for export.

2.9e 'Universal Responsibility and the Good Heart'

Elsewhere we have already quoted the words of the Dalai Lama emphasising the active global responsibility of Buddhists, and the importance above all of what he calls 'Universal Responsibility and the Good Heart.' In all countries will be found non-Buddhists, whether religionists or humanists, who share with us a non-violent, non-dogmatic and non-sectarian approach to community and world problems, and with whom Buddhists can work in close co-operation and with mutual respect. This is part of the 'Good Heart' to which the Dalai Lama refers. "I believe that the embracing of a particular religion like Buddhism does not mean the rejection of another religion or one's own community. In fact it is important that those of you who have embraced Buddhism should not cut yourself off from your own

society; you should continue to live within your own community and with its members. This is not only for your sake but for others' also, because by rejecting your community you obviously cannot benefit others, which actually is the basic aim of religion" (Dalai Lama, 1976).

Mr Emilios Bouratinos and his colleagues of the Buddhist Society of Greece have framed certain farsighted proposals for the 'rehumanisation of society' which have Buddhist inspiration but which seek to involve non-Buddhist ideological groups with the aim of reaching some common ground with them on the organisation of society. Mr. Bouratinos argues that Buddhists should address themselves "to all people somehow inspired from within—whether they be religionists or not. This is indispensable, for we Buddhists are a tiny minority in the West and yet we must touch the hearts of many if this world is to survive in some meaningful fashion" (Letter to the author, 25 May 1980).

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 characterised 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 saṃsāra." 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.

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Notes

1. Translated in The **Wheel No. 14**, *Everyman's Ethics*

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