

*Wheel Publication No. 199*

**Human Progress:  
Reality or Illusion?**

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# Human Progress: Reality or Illusion?

by

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**Buddhist Publication Society**  
**Kandy, Sri Lanka**

**The Wheel Publication No. 199**

ISSN 0068—3345

First edition: 1974

BPS Online Edition © 2006

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# Introduction



Not only do many non-Buddhists consider Buddhism to be an irrelevant, outmoded teaching that has nothing to offer the modern world, but many people who profess Buddhism regard the teaching as a kind of private retreat where they can hide and ignore the problems that beset mankind in this technological age. Though the Buddha's therapy goes beyond the treating of symptoms and aims at a radical cure, Buddhism takes cognisance of suffering in all its manifestations and offers effective remedies to those who wish to be healed.

We are all aware that mankind now possesses the means to destroy itself and all life on this earth, and that the factors in his character that perpetuate greed, hatred and delusion persist unabated and thus threaten to lead to a final conflict in which all will perish. The Dhamma points directly at those factors in man that are responsible for the desperate situation in which he now finds himself, and puts forward practical steps to help him to master his passions and his delusions. Far from being an outmoded, esoteric doctrine, it is, in fact, the life raft to which the human race must cling if it is not to be swallowed by the turbulent ocean of its own greed, hatred, and delusion.

To show the importance of the Dhamma to modern, technological man it is necessary to relate it directly to the problems of today about which he is concerned, and to use language and analogies with which he is familiar. This is what this article attempts to do, in the hope that Buddhists may be able to use this material in their discussions with their fellow men and thus more effectively spread the incomparable teaching that the Buddha gave mankind 2500 years ago.

# I. Our Attitude Towards Progress

There is a strong, deep-seated belief, particularly in the so-called developed countries of the West, that mankind is steadily progressing. It is easy to understand why this feeling exists, for the Industrial Revolution that we are still experiencing has produced, and is still producing, a bewildering array of mechanical gadgets which, when compared with previous models, perform the tasks for which they were designed more satisfactorily and more efficiently. The extraordinary thing, however, is this form of mechanical progress has been confused with human progress in the widest possible sense. The former is taken as an indication that man is improving in a meaningful way in the sense of leading a more satisfactory and worthwhile life. To see whether in fact this is so, we must, of course, establish a standard against which we can measure progress in the latter sense, for without this standard all we are recording is change, change that may very well be regression, not improvement.

## Progress—What Standards Should We Apply?

What, then, should this standard be? Here we must stop

and ask ourselves what it is we are seeking from life. What is the basic motive behind our actions, regardless of how we actually conduct ourselves? The majority of us experience the world as something quite apart from our own bodies which, if you think about it, is distinctly odd, for where else did we come from if not the world? We conceive ourselves to be a small, weak organism struggling against an environment—and this includes our fellow men—that is always actually or potentially hostile. This way of viewing the world inevitably breeds a strong feeling of insecurity, unhappiness, and fear so that the individual is constantly striving, in a multitude of ways, to overcome this sense of insecurity and to find contentment at a permanent level. Put more succinctly, he seeks to experience integration in his environment and not alienation from it. The fact that, as a general rule human beings experience alienation means that they suffer, and it is the longing to overcome suffering that motivates their actions.

A whole spectrum of human activities bears witness to this. At one end of the scale, we may find the ruthless, political tyrant overtly forcing others to accept his domination because he believes that he can thereby manipulate his environment to conform to his ideas of what is good for himself. At the other end of the scale, we may observe the compulsive philanthropist, apparently performing one meritorious deed after another in the service of his fellow men, yet who may well, though not necessarily, be acting from purely selfish motives since he lives in the hope of

'eternal bliss' as a reward for his 'good' deeds.

In considering human progress then, we are concerned essentially, though not exclusively, with an attitude of mind—not with changes we effect in the material world—no matter how intricate or marvellous they may seem to be. We are all familiar with the tragic figure of the famous film star, surrounded by every conceivable luxury, who then commits suicide because life becomes so unbearable. This surely should convince us that material progress, no matter how impressive, can provide no guarantee at all that the quality of people's lives will thereby be improved and that they will develop an attitude of mind that will enable them to feel themselves as an essential, inalienable part of the whole, wonderful process of life, and not as a small, separate organism ranged against the rest of the universe. Progress, therefore, at a fundamental level can be measured by the extent to which we overcome our experience of living in an alienated universe and instead acquire the certain feeling that we belong, unquestionably and absolutely, to the cosmos of which beings we, as human beings, are as much an expression as anything else. Our prime concern should be the discovery of the method that can best help us acquire this new way of experiencing life for no other achievement, in the final analysis, is of any consequence.

This, if one can delve through the plethora of words that have poured out over the centuries, is what religion, philosophy, and politics appear to be all about—helping man to find the reality of his own nature, for if he knows

this he will find harmony and unshakable lasting peace.

All the great religions recognise, in one form or another, the unsatisfactory nature of man's normal experience of life and suggest ways and means for overcoming what appear to be the negative aspects of human existence, even if the promised improvement is delayed until a life after death. It is the merit of Buddhism, however, that it analyses profoundly the condition of human suffering and puts forward a clear and comprehensive method for eliminating the condition of suffering. Central to the whole theme of Buddhist teaching is practical effort directed towards this end. Buddhism is, essentially, something to do, not something to believe in.

## Material Considerations

To avoid possible misunderstandings, let us for a moment return to materialism. Regardless of how human beings may experience life, they remain human beings.

This means, at the very least, they must breathe, eat, drink, and sleep, and must be clothed and sheltered if they live in cold climates. It is, of course, perfectly sensible and normal that proper consideration should be given to these matters. What, however, is not sensible and normal, let alone wise, is that we should become obsessed with them. This, tragically enough, is precisely what has happened. Instead of deciding, calmly and objectively, what the optimum requirements are for human beings, as far as material



necessities are concerned, and planning to provide these in a sensible and equitable fashion, we pursue what is known as a higher standard of living with almost paranoid intensity.

The two largest political systems in the world, communism and capitalism, are dedicated to producing and consuming ever-increasing quantities of material goods, and their only essential disagreement concerns the methods that should be used to achieve the maximum output of materialist bric-a-brac. Of course, one can argue a great deal about what is the minimum requirement of material wellbeing for human beings—how many calories they should consume, how much space they should occupy, etc. But, the important thing is that, if we get our priorities straight, if we give up our absurd obsession with acquiring material wealth and power, we should quite naturally gravitate towards an optimum possession and use of material things. Our only incentive for owning a bigger house than the Joneses up the road, for example, would be if our family were larger than their family, not because we wished to prove that we were wealthier or more important than they were. Also, we should understand that if we could truly lose our ingrained selfishness, we would be as anxious for others to possess the optimum material necessities as we would be to possess them ourselves. We would, to use an overworked phrase, love, or have as much concern for our neighbours as for ourselves.

## Egotism and Political Systems Derived from It

Our egocentric view of life is so deeply entrenched in us that we find it extraordinarily difficult to stand back, as it were, and observe the workings of the ego in a detached way since this virtually requires a revolution in our way of experiencing life. Nevertheless, we must try to understand what egotism means and the way it influences and distorts our lives, for this must be the first step in overcoming our deep-seated fear of the vagaries of existence. Let us examine firstly what egotism leads to in practical politics.

Politics professes to be very concerned with the relationship of individuals within society. Whole political philosophies—communism for example—are apparently concerned with eliminating the exploitation of one group of individuals by another, which a laudable aim. Politics essentially seeks to remedy these injustices by restructuring society. This is rather like trying to cure disease by redesigning the hospital. True, the redesign may improve the efficiency with which the hospital is run, but only if proper attention is being devoted to the patients in the first place. The history of communities is, with very few exceptions, one long dreary tale of stupidity, cruelty, greed, and exploitation because the majority of individuals have been acting, first and foremost, from selfish motives, although their actual words and deeds have frequently been wrapped in one or another convenient guise of virtue.

The naive revolutionaries, who advocate the elimination of

their existing rulers or the entire so-called ruling class of a community, fail to realise that the same seeds of exploitation and cruelty lie within themselves and their followers. Once the opportunity is placed in their hands they, too, will manipulate and exploit others in the name of justice and progress. Can anyone, for example, seriously suggest that the regime of Joseph Stalin was not in its essential features as cruel, stupid, and oppressive as any regime of the old Czars? It is only if the vicious circle of self-interest can be broken that there is hope of real progress in politics. Yet, the overcoming of self-interest is something that only the individual, by his own efforts, can achieve because it is not attained by dependence on the grace or goodwill of anyone else. Once again, Buddhist teaching and training underline this fact and expound on it. Truth is an experience that must pass through, and be felt by, the mind of the individual, for nobody else can intercede between him and Reality.

Religious activity, in Buddhist terms, consists of the training and control of the mind so that it is receptive to Truth. This is in marked contrast to many other religions, whose main activity is related to the pleasing or placating of a deity on whose goodwill it is believed man's wellbeing depends.

There have, of course, been changes in society and, I think, one may even validly assert that there is less overt oppression and exploitation in some countries of the world than there used to be. But this does not derive, I believe, from any basic change in the attitude of the majority of individuals, but solely from the fact that our technological

civilization has enormously improved the media of communication. Books, films, television, and travel enable people to draw comparisons much more easily than ever before. New ideas, thoughts, and beliefs are disseminated now to millions in a fraction of the time that was needed in the past. Now the classical figure of political tracts, the rapacious factory owner, may find his unreasonable actions featured as Press headlines, whereas 150 years ago he could probably have confined adverse comment on his actions to his immediate neighbourhood and have suppressed any open criticism by virtue of the local power he wielded. Today he must be more circumspect in the way he behaves and more subtle in the types of exploitation he uses.

His methods, therefore, change but this does not represent progress, for he remains what he was—selfish, greedy and unfeeling. Given half the chance, he would quickly revert to his old practises and he is constantly probing for new ways to take advantage of people.

The advantages of mass communication, outlined above, apply however only in certain societies. We must clearly recognise these technological marvels are tools which, in the hands of unscrupulous political leaders, can lead to a form of tyranny as bad as anything predicted by George Orwell in his book '1984'. Even before the advent of television and the computer, Adolf Hitler managed to impose almost total control over the people of Germany by a subtle and ruthless combination of propaganda and terror. The communist dictatorships try to apply similar methods today, so that,

over vast areas of the world, people are denied access to ideas and concepts that do not conform to the narrow and prejudicial view of the world advocated by the political commissars controlling those areas.

The possibilities of progress are dim, indeed, if people are not permitted to think freely and to express ideas freely. Anyone who is sincerely seeking the truth has no attachment to any particular idea or concept if, on reflection or as a result of new evidence, a previously held point of view appears to be incorrect; the wise man discards it no matter how inviolate or sacred society may regard this particular concept to be. It is only the man who is afraid or uncertain who clings to ideas and vilifies others who disagree with him. Such conduct is once again a sure sign of the ego at work. If a comfortable belief that gave the ego a sense of security has been questioned, it reacts predictably by engendering anger and abuse in its subject. A person so conditioned by his ego consciousness is no longer interested in establishing what is truth. Indeed, his own prejudices are themselves described as 'truth' and all who question them are dismissed as heathens or heretics. This sad history of intolerance and cruelty has so often manifested itself under the banner of established religious systems. When the ego feels threatened, there are no bounds to the self-deception that it will employ to regain its position of false security.

## The Pattern of Human Activity

We seem strangely unable or unwilling to appreciate that the basic pattern of human activity today shows no evidence of change from the dawn of history. Wars still flourish and individuals, and groups of individuals, assiduously pursue their own selfish interests by deceiving, abusing, and injuring others. Our laws, though more complex than those of former, more primitive societies, seek with only partial success to restrain the same anti-social and selfish activities of individuals that originally gave rise to codes of law in the first organised societies of man.

If we read the accounts of the proceedings of the Roman Senate, or if we follow the life story of one of Rome's leading political figures—his intrigues, his deceptions, his betrayals of trust, his broken promises, his ruthless outmanoeuvring or even elimination of political opponents, his lust for power over others—do we stand back bewildered and uncomprehending because we cannot understand what motivated him to behave in this way? Of course we don't because, in many, many cases, it is the same sad story today. The same type of individual is doing exactly the same things. He wears a suit instead of a toga, and he rides to work in a Mercedes instead of a chariot—but here the difference ends. The ego consciousness in him is as active as ever it was in his Roman counterpart with its scheming, hating, deceiving, and injuring—and all to give itself an illusion of security.

We cannot talk of progress or, indeed, even of change in this context. We are merely observing the sterile repetition of a

pattern caught in a vicious circle of self-delusion. It is only if this circle can be broken that there is hope of progress. This, in turn, is only possible if we are completely honest with ourselves. We must be prepared to examine all our attitudes, no matter how 'pure' or 'unsullied' we may believe them to be, since there is always the possibility that the ego is playing its perpetual game of deceit and is making its efforts doubly difficult to spot by hiding them under a cloak of virtue. Indeed, as soon as we start putting a label like 'pure' on any of our actions, we should immediately become suspicious since we are inevitably comparing ourselves with others and forming our own prejudicial value judgements. In such circumstances we are probably guilty of one of the most deep-seated 'sins' of all—spiritual pride. The ego sits back smugly and assures itself that it is 'better' than others are; it is storing up meritorious deeds and will one day be rewarded. But this is the same game as before: the ego wants something be it reassurance, security, or invulnerability. It wants to climb up to a higher position in order to have the satisfaction of seeing others below it. To see just how devious the ego can be, let us examine in some detail one of these poses of virtue.

## Anti-Racialism

The subject I would like to look at, in this connection, is what is loosely described as 'anti-racialism', a popular cause these days subscribed to by a wide group of people, who

usually propagate their views under the banner of 'liberalism'.

The anti-racialist has fastened onto an objectionable attitude of mind where he feels he can righteously and vigorously condemn racialism: the intolerant rejection by one group to other groups that exhibit what are usually called different racial characteristics that the former group classifies as 'inferior'. What a marvellous object for generating spiritual pride this situation has proved to be, even for those who describe themselves as atheists. So much of a sacred cow has the cult of anti-racialism become that it is now very difficult to discuss it rationally at all. Anyone who dares to suggest that differences between races may exist releases a very powerful psychological reaction in adherents of this cult. But, let us assume for the sake of argument, that these differences do exist and, furthermore, that they are not caused solely by environmental factors but are, to an important extent, true hereditary differences. Does this matter and if so why? If we observe that there are differences between peoples—at the very least, no one can deny that there are differences in skin, eye and hair colour—it is we who arbitrarily label these differences 'superior' or 'inferior'. Unfortunately, in this age, as we have seen, we put an enormously high value on this technological civilisation that we have created. Therefore, we tend to consider that such qualities as inventiveness, organising ability, mathematical skill, punctuality, and the ability to persuade people to buy goods (which they don't want and



don't need have) in absolute terms. We place a higher value on them than other human qualities because it is with the aid of these attributes that we keep this civilisation running and expanding. But, this, after all, is an entirely subjective judgment.

I remember that during the Malayan Emergency at the beginning of the 1950s, the British Army brought from Borneo a large number of Dayak trackers, each of whom was assigned to a different British platoon operating in the jungle. These little men could follow the track of a man through the jungle where a European would get down on his knees with a magnifying glass and see nothing. One could quite validly assert that, when it came to tracking, the Dayaks were probably superior to any other group of people on earth. In saying this, one is merely making an objective observation that, of course, should be changed if it is shown to be incorrect. It is the ego that creates the subjective values about what is desirable and undesirable, and what is superior, in absolute terms, or inferior. That which appears to aid the ego in its struggle to survive and become more powerful is 'better' than that which, in any specific set of circumstances, is not so effective in performing this 'task'. If, however, people were not motivated by the egotistical drive to dominate and control others, these differences would be welcomed and the hopelessly idealistic motto of communism, 'from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs', would indeed be realised in human society: the 'superior'

attributes of one man in a given situation would be as much at the service of others as at the service of himself: His possession of this ability would not, as now, give rise to feelings of fear and envy because they would not represent a threat to the personal ego of anyone else.

Here lies the clue to the attitude of the self-righteous anti-racist. His ego, too, has observed the differences in abilities that exist between people. At some time in his life, if we were able to dig deeply enough, we would almost certainly find the development of what has been called an inferiority complex. The person has measured himself, using the subjective values of the ego, against one or more of his compatriots and has found himself wanting. The ego consciousness, of course, reacts strongly against this unpleasant revelation and sets to work to rationalise it out of existence. It pretends that these differences between individuals derive solely from differences of opportunity. Anyone who suggests that they are hereditary is immediately dismissed as an 'evil racist' whose views no 'right thinking' person need bother to examine. All that is needed is the right kind of environment and we will all exhibit the same characteristics and abilities. Every individual could have written the Matthew Passion of Bach or worked out Einstein's theory of relativity. So at last the ego is placated. It is not its fault that it is 'inferior' but the fault of wicked men or a wicked society that failed to give it the right opportunities to develop its true potential. At this point the individual is liable to dedicate his life to one of the

saddest of all political futilities: the creation of a multi-racial, one-world society in which everyone exhibits exactly the same capabilities, the same likes and dislikes, and devotes himself to being in no way different from his zombie neighbours because then the poor, frightened little ego need not feel inferior to anyone else any longer.

The anti-racialist is, therefore, shown to be just as dominated by egotistical self-interest as the racialist. One can even assert that the latter is at least more open and straightforward in his egotism since he flatly asserts that anyone who does not measure up to his own subjective judgement of what constitutes desirable attributes should be classed as 'inferior', and those with whom he co-operates in his struggle for survival must be able to make a worthwhile contribution to the common cause of self-interest (selfishness after all frequently has to be pursued in collaboration with others).

Surely, the path of common sense is neither racialism nor anti-racialism. If the self-centred motives of the ego are exposed and understood, it is only the welfare of mankind as a whole that is seen to be important. Abilities, qualities, and characteristics are then sought in individuals solely on the basis of need. If a bridge has to be built, a good civil engineer is engaged regardless of what colour his skin is or where he comes from. Even if it is found that a particular racial group exhibits collectively certain required abilities, this should simply be observed objectively and utilised; it should not become a reason for developing racial pride, on

the one hand, or righteous indignation on the other. It has been observed that the Iroquois Indians of North America, as a group, make very good steeplejacks since they have no fear of heights. Is one a racist to state that this race of people make better steeplejacks than their fellow citizens of the Caucasian race?

## The Time Scale of Progress

The pace of technological progress is now so rapid that anything that, in a technical field, is more than a year or two old is considered obsolete or at least obsolescent. Once again, this attitude of mind has strongly influenced the way we regard ideas produced in what we term the fields of religion and philosophy. Our obsession with the standards of technical progress leads us to believe that something new is, ipso facto, something 'better'. The old, in whatever connection we use this word, tends to be regarded as having little or no significance to our present needs. But here we have our time scale hopelessly wrong. It is now thought that creatures which could be described as members of the human species existed as long ago as four million years. Of this period, our recorded history goes back only about seven thousand years, while some of the most striking and original ideas concerning the nature of man were probably not expressed longer than three thousand years ago. This is but yesterday on the scale of geological time and it is almost certainly in these terms that we must consider progress in

the fundamental sense of human beings evolving to become a fully mature and wise species.

It is indeed a remarkable presumption on our part to describe ourselves as *Homo sapiens* (wise man), for that as a species we most certainly are not. We may, as has been suggested by some anthropologists (e.g., Konrad Lorenz), be perhaps halfway along the path towards true wisdom and understanding. We have shown a potential for wisdom, but that is all at present.

We must appreciate the limitations of language and the limitations of our own understanding in trying to assess the value of knowledge and teachings that have been passed down to us, and the extent to which, if they were properly understood, those teachings may represent progress in the fundamental sense to which I have alluded. There is no doubt that in roughly the first millennium B. C. there lived a number of very remarkable men: the unknown authors of the Vedanta, Socrates, the Buddha, Lao Tzu and Christ, to name only the best known of these. Bearing in mind the significance of the geological time scale and the fact that, *in evolutionary terms*, the passing of 2000–000 years is equivalent to less than a day in the life of a 70 year old man (assuming very optimistically that the human species could potentially exist for as long as the dinosaurs existed—over 120 million years), we can perhaps begin to appreciate that we may only have begun to understand what these men were trying to tell us. They had to use the languages of the people into whose midst they were born, with all the

shortcomings of these languages (or indeed any human language), and were obliged to use the imagery with which the people were familiar. Christ could scarcely have talked about Truth or Reality without relating it in some way to the Hebrew concept of God, with all the special connotations that already held for the people of Palestine, whereas the Buddha would have been unintelligible to the people of Northern India if he had used similar terms. Inevitably, unavoidably, there were misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and false conclusions regarding what these men were trying to convey, for only a small minority really understood.

Yet so great was the impact of these men that their influence has persisted to this day and we can perhaps regard them as the first examples of genuine Homo sapiens: truly wise and balanced individuals who were living examples of what man could become if he learnt to break out of the prison of his ego. Far from having progressed beyond their teachings, we may in fact only just be beginning to understand what they really meant.

Certain religious traditions, notwithstanding the original experience of Truth which their founders may have had, retained certain fundamental concepts, such as a personalised God, which have proved to be, in practise, serious obstacles to man in his search for Truth. The second part of this article deals specifically with this concept because it is of such importance.

Today, we are becoming increasingly aware that something is fundamentally wrong with our marvellously intricate technological civilisation despite all the talk of progress. Crime, stress, unhappiness, cruelty, and conflict not only persist but also grow steadily worse. Since now we possess weapons which can very easily, and very quickly, destroy all life on this earth, we must somehow, somewhere, find an answer to the appalling predicament in which we find ourselves if man is not to terminate his own development while still, so to speak, in his infancy. Cannot we see that our civilisation is motivated by one of the most stupid of human emotions, greed, which is an expression of the ego's desire to acquire and dominate? Schopenhauer, the German philosopher, put the present human situation very succinctly when he said, "There are three factors which determine the attitude of people:

1. What a person possesses,
2. How a person appears to others, and
3. What a person is.

We are obsessed with the first two of these, and we virtually ignore the last, which is the only one of any concern. As soon as we begin school, we are urged to work hard to make a success of our careers, not to strive to find peace with ourselves. At every turn, we are encouraged to become more important, to earn more money, to get ahead at the expense of others. The very standard of achievement is the possession of money and power. As a result, a great many

able and apparently intelligent people dedicate their lives to scrambling frantically up the anthill to have the momentary satisfaction of telling the world that they are better or more successful than others are. Most of those who do get to the top quickly succumb to heart attacks or serious stomach trouble, while those that don't make it are liable to develop a whole range of frustrations and complexes because they have failed in what is, with cynical insight, known as the "rat-race." Do we really consider that this neurotic activity constitutes 'progress?'

This activity is alienating us more and more from our natural surroundings and our fellow men. We are steeped in hypocrisy and double talk: we present a mask to the world that is not a reflection of our true selves, but which desperately tries to project the type of individual that our frenetic society professes to admire. How sad and futile it all is. We should be able to regard it as a joke but, unfortunately it is a joke gone sour because, unless we can put things right soon, we will not be here to enjoy our laugh. The only thing that matters is what we are truly in ourselves. If we can know that, we will find quite naturally the peace, harmony, and contentment we so desperately seek down a multitude of blind alleys.

Progress can only be achieved if we realise that the ego is an illusion that drives us, haunts us, forcing us into the most terrible contortions to provide itself with an illusion of security and continuity. Unless we understand this, we can never let go, never move with the rhythm of life, never lose



the fear of our environment.

To progress we must learn to let go. We must lose the arrogant belief our technical prowess has given us: that we can find all the answers to existence by manipulating, in ever more intricate ways, our physical environment. We must acquire the humility to realise that, as far as an understanding of ourselves is concerned, we are still children. The technological civilisation we have created is simply an elaborate restructuring of the material world. It has not been accompanied by a concomitant understanding of the need to control and train our minds or curb our impulses. Hence, the suffering caused by these impulses is still experienced in full measure. Indeed, because material civilisation has produced such a vast range of consumer products, man's natural acquisitive instincts, which are one of the roots of suffering, have now been given much wider scope than ever before.

## II. Obstacles to Progress

### Man's Political Concept of God

For many centuries in the West, man's concept of Reality or Truth has been incorporated into the figure of God as represented by a deity, in human form, possessing superhuman powers. The effect of this image of Reality has been very far-reaching indeed; it has conditioned, and still conditions, in endless subtle ways the attitude of people in the West towards life and their fellow men. It has caused innumerable misconceptions and misunderstandings as to what constitutes 'religion' and correct living. If Western Buddhists are to help their fellow men to progress in meaningful human terms, it is important that they should understand how this concept arose and the hindrance to which it gives rise.

### The Structure of Community Life

With rare, usually short-lived, exceptions human societies have been and are administered on the leadership principle. That is, one individual known by a variety of exotic or mundane titles—Emperor, King, Chief, President, or Prime

Minister—has ruled a community or nation helped by a special group of privileged assistants. At lower levels in the larger communities, this pattern has been faithfully mirrored down to the most humble village council. The fact that many different methods of selecting the leader have been adopted—from so-called democratic processes to the overt, violent takeover of power by a dictator—is irrelevant to the existence of the pattern as such. People are, therefore, conditioned to having an individual sitting in judgement over them, and issuing orders and instructions to them either directly or through intermediaries. The ruler, however, is like those he rules: a human being, dominated almost certainly by the same egotistical desires and impulses as his subjects. Indeed, his position may well have strengthened those desires to a far greater degree than is the case with people in more modest positions because the opportunities for feeding the ego's appetite for adulation and self-grandeur are that much greater. As the old adage puts it, 'power corrupts but absolute power corrupts absolutely.' As a result, perhaps the most familiar figure in the pages of our history books is the political leader, be he known as a king or a president, issuing commands and threats, expecting, indeed demanding, that his subjects show him respect and deference, punishing those who go against his wishes and rewarding those who give him absolute, unquestioning obedience. This characteristic is made into a great virtue and dignified with the appellation loyalty. The king or president gives an order—it may be

stupid, cruel, and obviously motivated by malice—but the subject is supposed to carry out this order without thinking about it or asking himself whether it is right or wrong, sensible or absurd. If he complies, he is loyal and good. If he does think for himself and refuses, he is liable to be dubbed a traitor and severely punished.

For countless centuries, therefore, people have had instilled into them respect for established authority. Of course, they have rebelled against this requirement from time to time when the demands made on them became too wild or irresponsible, but with very little delay new personalities have replaced those who overstepped the mark, and the whole process has continued on as before. The attitude of the French kings drove the people of France to Revolution in 1789, but those who were subsequently placed in power as the 'representatives of the people,' pursued self-aggrandisement with at least the same fervour and disregard for the rights of their fellow men as the regime before them.

Because of this age-old tradition of political overlords controlling communities, it is hardly surprising that people should have adopted an attitude towards the father figure of God that is remarkably similar to that which they adopted towards their political leader. The only important differences, in this respect, were that God stood on a higher pedestal than the political leader, God possessed an all-seeing eye from which no action of the individual could escape, and God offered, or was believed to be able to offer,

to the individual ego the prize it most desired—everlasting life. This was a powerful combination, indeed, for instilling obedience.

Not only does the attitude which people adopted towards God show the same characteristics as that adopted towards the political leader, but the character of God himself appeared to mirror that of the human ruler on earth, with perhaps the one difference that people felt that God would at least be fair in his judgement of the actions of man against the standards which it is believed he laid down.

## Man's Relationship to God

The relationship of man to God in the occident has, therefore, always been marked by concepts of duty and obedience (largely blind obedience), the need to praise and placate the deity, the belief that by adopting a suitable posture of humbleness and submission individual supplications and wishes may be granted, and fear that failure to abide by the code of law, which God is supposed to have issued, will lead to punishment.

But these characteristics we ascribe to God are manifestations of human egotism as found in the human leader. The human leader issues commands, and institutes rewards and punishments, in order to force people to behave in a way which he believes will most enhance his position of privilege and power and give him the security which his ego craves even though this is justified in terms of

promoting the good of the whole community, and even if such action does bring apparent material advantage to the community. He requires people to bow down before him or in other ways show deference towards him because these are outward signs that individuals are prepared to accept his judgements and his requirements in preference to their own. It is a sign that they are prepared to be manipulated. The use of flattery, so prevalent in prayers and hymns, implies that the hearer is so plagued by feelings of insecurity that he needs to be constantly reassured that he is, in fact, much wiser and more capable than he really feels himself to be. The strange thing here is that the very definition of God as 'all-seeing and all-wise' must exclude the possibility that he suffers from any feelings of inadequacy engendered by ego consciousness, in which case he does not need reassurance, praise, adulation or a group of devotees pledged to obey his wishes without question.

But the normal occidental association between our political outlook, and our concept of God and religion, is much closer than the identification of the personality of God with that of a political leader, for there seems little doubt that the concept of God (with all the associations outlined above) has been deliberately fostered and used by political leaders to obtain obedience to their man-made laws devised to strengthen the community. Once human communities had come into existence, the men into whose hands the reins of government fell were obliged, by virtue of the conflicts that arose among their subjects as a result of ego consciousness,

to devise rules and regulations that kept disagreements, crime, and internal strife within reasonable bounds. In many cases, obviously, it was very difficult to enforce obedience to these laws because people were unwilling to accept them or the restrictions on 'freedom of action' that their acceptance entailed.

In such a situation, the most effective method of ensuring a high degree of compliance was to assert that the laws that the political leaders had devised were, in fact, passed to them by God himself. The most well known example of this process at work is the Old Testament story of the divine promulgation of the Ten Commandments to Moses. They, of course, form, part of a much longer discourse giving, among other things, rules governing the practise of slavery, an estate that the Christian Church subsequently decided was against God's wishes. To emphasise still more the close association between the human leader and God, the former was, in many societies, openly given a divine status. The Egyptian Pharaohs and the Emperors of Rome were considered to be incarnations of a God, In our day, the Emperor of Japan, up to 1945, was considered to be a God The King of Nepal is still considered to be an incarnation of a God.

## The Determinants of Behaviour

But behaviour that results from compulsion is unreliable, unnatural, and false. There is an enormous difference

between an individual who assists his neighbours because he believes God or his king requires it of him, and will reward or punish him for his actions, and the individual who spontaneously provides help when it is needed without any ulterior motive because it is as natural and right to him as breathing. The man who has overcome his egocentric view of life appreciates that, at a fundamental level, the welfare of all is identical with his welfare, so that his actions are no longer determined by an inborn preference for what he conceives to be his own good, as opposed to the good of others.

To harm others, or to withhold help deliberately from others, would, for such a person, be understood to be as injurious an act, fundamentally speaking, as walking into a fire or over a cliff. The development of this attitude of mind is one of the principal tenets of Buddhism that expounds the practise of clear and complete awareness of all the ego-induced motives, emotions, and reactions taking place in the mind with the aim of their control and eventual elimination. Great confusion has been caused, in this connection, because the 'political' laws devised to restrict conflict within a community—and presented, as we have seen frequently, as 'religious' laws purporting to be the demands of a God—reflect often the natural behaviour of an individual who is no longer motivated by his ego. The political leader wants the community members over whom he rules to work together harmoniously and help one another, he wants them to refrain from robbing and injuring



their neighbours—but why? Because this will strengthen the cohesion and effectiveness of the community, which, in turn, will enhance its chances of survival and success in competition or conflict with other communities. Since the political leader's power, prestige, and ultimately perhaps his very survival, depend on the strength of the community with whom he identifies himself, he has a vested interest in upholding and enforcing neighbourliness. The fundamental difference, in concept and motive, behind the formal code of law deriving from the needs of the community or the requirements of its ruler, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the natural spontaneous humanity of the egoless individual, is perhaps most clearly seen in the attitude towards the act of killing.

The deliberate killing of a member of one's own community is regarded as a most serious crime for which a special term, 'murder,' is employed. Such an act is liable to cause much dissension within the community. Indeed, one can find many instances in all communities where such killings have resulted in long, drawn-out feuds and vendettas, and it materially weakened the community by depriving it of one of its members. It is, therefore, rightly condemned and carries a severe punishment.

Let us now look at the same act of killing in a different set of circumstances. The political leader and his advisers decide to go to war against another community. Immediately, an entirely new and very different attitude is adopted towards this act. Not only is it now condoned, but actively

encouraged. Extravagant emotional terms like duty and loyalty are bandied around to encourage the community members to regard fellow human beings, who happen to belong to a group arbitrarily designated by the community's political leaders as 'the enemy,' as fair game against whom the most barbarous acts of injury and death may be inflicted. For thousands of years men have allowed themselves to be duped in this fashion with scarcely a voice being raised against the absurdity, the futility, and the sheer inhumanity of this practise. What a sad reflection on the supposed progress of mankind.

The individual who has overcome his egotism, however, is no longer prepared to allow his actions to be dictated by the arbitrary will of a political leader who is motivated by egotism. Such an individual does not have a double standard because his ego is no longer looking for ways and means to pursue its own self-aggrandisement. The man who has gone beyond egotism is no longer dependent on a guide to conduct laid down by anybody else, whether political person or supernatural 'leader,' because his ego is no longer concerned with behaving in a manner that it believes will bring it security at the price of conformity. The conduct of such a man reflects the unshakeable inner knowledge that he and his environment are one, and that, in a fundamental sense, any harm he inflicts on that environment (which naturally includes his fellow men) he inflicts on himself as well. In the Christian ethic this is expressed as 'What you do to the least of these my brethren, you do unto me.' His

concern for others is, therefore, a total commitment, in the sense that there is no motivation behind his actions that places a priority on his own personal needs or desires. He quite naturally does not steal from, kill, hate, or exploit his fellow men because he completely identifies himself with them. There is no self and other.

His code of conduct, furthermore, is entirely natural, unforced, and unassailable. He does not abandon one code of conduct or adopt another because he loses faith in the existence of a law-giving God, and he is not living a lie by following a particular code out of fear or hope of reward. The achievement of natural, egoless conduct of this kind is the hallmark of one who is following the path that the Buddha showed to mankind: the path of sanity and inner peace that leads eventually to the extinction of suffering.

## The Function of the Community

To understand fully the attitude of such a man, and how it contrasts with the attitude of the 'obedient, loyal citizen' in the type of society to which we are accustomed, it is most important for us to examine and understand the function of the community in our lives.

As far back as we can go in human history, we find the phenomenon of separate, distinct communities that regard other communities as possible or actual rivals. This pattern of human society is of deep significance in explaining our attitudes and our behaviour, and we should pause and

reflect on it. Why should human beings, with the rare exception of the odd hermit, elect to live lives fettered by the rules, regulations, prejudices, and requirements of an artificial community? The answer lies again, surely, in man's egocentric experience of life. The early caveman soon found, that because of the acquisitiveness and potential aggressiveness of his fellow men based on their innate selfishness, he needed allies for protection and to assert himself in the world. He called on a friendly neighbour and suggested a mutual assistance pact: he would come to the neighbour's assistance if requested and the neighbour would come to his aid in similar circumstances. To avoid continuous confrontation, the two probably moved away from the immediate vicinity of more unfriendly individuals, and so was born the first rudimentary form of a distinct community bound together by an agreement to provide mutual protection in the interests of the constituent members. Since numbers represented strength, the tendency always was for the community to grow in size from an association of a few families, to a tribe, to a clan, to a city-state, and finally to a modern nation comprising tens if not hundreds of millions of individuals. Yet despite the huge size of the modern nations, compared with the tiny embryo communities of early man, the basis of its existence and its function remain the same: to further the collective, materialist interests of the individuals comprising the community in opposition to the interests of individuals in other communities and groups.

For century after century, the attitude of the individual within the community has been conditioned by the demand that he apply a double standard towards his fellow men. On one hand, there is friendship, co-operation, even self-sacrifice towards those his political leaders identify for him in various arbitrary ways—skin colour, language, behaviour—as being members of his own community. (After all, rival communities—England and Scotland for example—frequently coalesce in order to face an even bigger rival.) On the other hand, there is reserve, suspicion, and latent or actual hostility towards those who are designated 'outsiders', members of other communities or nations.

Now the conflict of interests and the confusion is laid bare. The community laws for containing conflict within the community—however reasonable, enlightened, and high-minded they may appear to be—are, in reality, a subtle product of ego consciousness, the need of the ego to co-operate with others in order to further its own selfish objectives against individuals belonging to other groups.

To the individual who has overcome egotism, the arbitrary division of mankind into separate groups towards whom quite different standards of behaviour should be adopted is quite unacceptable. He discriminates in his dealings with others, certainly, but only to the degree of delusion and egocentricity that the individual with whom he is in contact is exhibiting, and always with the object of helping him to overcome his distorted view of reality that causes him so much suffering. There is no question at all of arbitrarily

discriminating against someone because he is of a different nationality or has been designated 'an enemy' by a political leader.

## Changes in Traditional Approaches to Truth

It is of interest and significance that modern theologians of the Christian Church have, in recent years, been employing emotionally neutral terms for God (for example, Paul Tillich's 'Ultimate Concern'), apparently in order to separate what I have called the 'political' aspects of the divine father image from the fundamental Reality of the universe to which this word also refers.

Unless this separation is effected and clearly understood, it seems inevitable that confusion and misunderstanding will persist. In the Buddhist approach to Reality, there is no concept of a 'father figure' (with or without political characteristics), and hence there is no danger of insincere and hypocritical postures being adopted towards such a figure.

## Obstacles to Progress. False Premises

Everyone of normal mental ability possesses a philosophy of life, however poorly articulated, that he has absorbed from the society in which he lives or, more rarely, which he has himself worked out from studying books, discussions with others, and by reflection. The whole tenor of a person's

thinking and his actions can be totally recast by the view of life that he comes to accept, the basic premise from which he forms judgements and acts. There are, of course, many accounts that bear witness to this.

One of the leading proponents of the doctrine of ends justifying the means was the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche's whole philosophy is based on an observation of life that he never stopped to consider or question—the struggle for existence. This became the foundation of all his subsequent ideas. He observed the conflict manifest in the animal and human world, and decided that continued existence in such an environment was of supreme, absolute importance and, in the pursuit of which, everything else should be sacrificed. The task of the individual was to make himself as fit and as ruthless as possible to become, as it were, a wild animal par excellence. He should consciously manipulate and use others to gain for himself greater status and power. Nietzsche was the supreme champion of the ego. He encouraged its paranoiac proportions and preached the development of a type of man devoid of any feelings of humanity, consideration, or compassion, which he curtly dismissed as signs of weakness or stupidity.

Nietzsche's views were, to all intents and purposes, translated into reality during Hitler's reign in Germany when the cultivation of the egotistical characteristics of ruthlessness and lust for power were openly propagated, subject only to the demands of the nation state whose

leaders laid down, more clearly than ever before, who was to be co-operated with in the interests of national solidarity and strength, and who could be regarded as “ sub-human and beyond any consideration whatever.

The extraordinary thing is that Nietzsche never seems to have considered that he was putting an absolute value on a struggle that, from the start, is doomed to failure—for every individual must die. He may possess enormous wealth, he may be respected and feared throughout the world, people may use the most extravagant language to describe his supposed virtues, but all this will vanish with his death. Life is not, cannot be, an end in itself, an eternal fortress that is made impregnable by ruthlessly manipulating others. Life as experienced by the individual is but a transitory phenomenon, but one that holds out certain great possibilities. Life, in all its forms, is a manifestation of the cosmos, self-evidently. Any philosophy, any way of life, that establishes the ego as the focus of motivation and activity will inevitably perpetuate all those factors of conflict, ill will, hatred, greed, and exploitation that cause the human race continuous, unnecessary suffering. No matter how sublime the apparent ideal, or how extravagant the language used to describe it, it offers no hope of improving the quality of human life unless it incorporates a clear understanding of the need to overcome the incessant demands of the individual ego for recognition, reassurance, and influence, and puts forward methods for achieving this.

Here is the critical, essential dividing line between



stagnation and progress, between truth and falsehood, between self-destruction and the unfolding of the latent wisdom of man.

It is the merit and the glory of Buddhism that it identifies this need so clearly and that it sets forth, in practical terms, the steps needed to achieve liberation from the enslaving passions and delusions of the ego. The Buddhist Dhamma, far from being an outmoded system of thought, turns out to be a teaching of direct relevance to the problems of today. It is a path of salvation that the human race, as a whole, desperately needs in order to save itself from itself.

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