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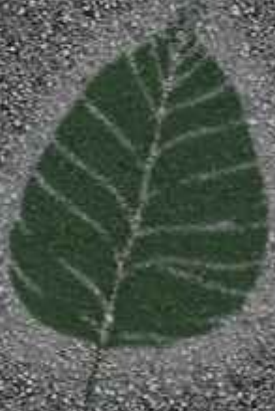
Buddhism in the Face of the Population Crisis

and

Conservation In Buddhist Perspective

Dr. Douglas M. Burns



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Two Essays By

Dr. Douglas M. Burns

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Buddhism in the Face of the Population Crisis

The problem can be expressed in terms of simple arithmetic. Our planet has a finite and measurable area: The number of human beings on the planet is increasing at a rate never before seen: One person per square mile, 10 persons per square mile, 1,000 per square mile times 100,000! At some point the earth can no longer sustain. And like rodents that have bred beyond the limits of their food supply, men will face poverty, starvation, destruction and death. "Man could have prevented it," they will say. "Why didn't he?"

As Buddhists living in the 20th century, we are asked: "What is the Buddhist view of the population crisis?" What is the Buddhist solution? To answer the question we must first clarify the question. The so-called Buddhist view may depend on the kind of Buddhism about which we are talking. Quite often what passes as a Buddhist view (on whatever topic) is in fact only a certain cultural, social or national point of view expressed by people who adhere to some Buddhist tradition. The religion may be rationalised to express the opinions of certain of its adherents.

Considered in this manner there could be any number of Buddhist views, some patently contradictory. To avoid this quandary and to acquire some standard from which to reason, let us speak not of the Buddhist view but rather the Buddha's view. That is, the attitude expressed in the Pali Canon, the early teachings of the Buddha.

However, the problem of stating a Buddhist position does not end here. For in fact the Buddha had very little to say about population crises. It was not a significant problem in his time. To ask for the Buddha's views on birth control is somewhat like asking for Shakespeare's attitude towards industrialization. Thus in seeking a Buddhist answer to the problem, there is always the danger of reading into the scriptures things which one hopes to find, the danger of forming conclusions which the recorders of the scriptures never believed. With this in mind, let us now examine some of the relevant passages of the Pali Canon which might let us consider the population crisis in Buddhist perspective. It is not difficult to find passages which deal with social issues and matters of interpersonal conduct. In the Vinaya Mahāvagga we find the Buddha saying:

> "Whosoever, bhikkhus, would wait upon me,
> Whosoever, bhikkhus, would honour me,
> Whosoever, bhikkhus, would follow my

advice,
He should wait upon the sick."

The numerous instructions given in the Sigālovāda Sutta are both well-known and timely. As but one example we note:

> "In five ways should a master minister to his servants and employees;
>
> 1. By assigning them work according to their strength.
>
> 2. By supplying them with food and wages.
>
> 3. By tending them in sickness.
>
> 4. By sharing with them unusual delicacies.
>
> 5. By granting them leave at times."

One of the foremost social problems of the Buddha's time was the caste system with its resulting injustices. It is clear that the Buddha was opposed to this system, yet he did not advocate revolution, class struggle or social agitation. He achieved his ends in other ways. First he undermined the philosophical rationalisations by which the Brahmin caste sought to justify its supremacy. The Brahmins maintained that the rigid hereditary system of four castes was divinely willed and enacted by God. The Buddha replied, if that be the

case, then why is it that in certain Persian states there are only two classes, the lords and the serfs? And even this was not fixed, for "sometimes the lords become serfs and the serfs lords." Again when the Brahmins claimed that they were a special race born from the mouth of God, the Buddha remarked that Brahmin women, like all others, are seen to menstruate, conceive and give birth; and from there he went on to say that all men, and all animals as well, shared common racial origins.

Secondly, the Buddha offered, for all who chose, a means to escape from the bonds of caste. By becoming a Buddhist one ceased to have caste identity. Regardless of birth, all Buddhists were to be considered equal in this regard. There was no need to fight against the caste system: by adopting Buddhism one simply stepped out of it.

For very good reasons (reasons which I shall mention shortly) Buddhism was not meant to be a political system nor a teaching which embraced a political or economic philosophy. Rather it was a system for curing certain human ills, ills of the mind. In this regard Buddhism is comparable to antiseptic surgery. So far as technique and effectiveness are concerned, there is no fundamental distinction between communist surgery and capitalist surgery, or between totalitarian surgery and democratic surgery.

They all work in essentially the same way and achieve the same results. One can be a dedicated and honest surgeon in Russia or in America, in Israel or in Egypt. The same is true for being a practising Buddhist.

The doctrine of *anicca* (i.e., change or mutability) shows that all political systems rise and fall. Few have lasted for more than a millennium at the longest. Had the Buddha tied his doctrine to a particular political or economic system, it would likely have perished with that system. Instead he instituted something that transcended politics and hence provided human fulfilment independently of the prevailing political-economic environment. But this does not mean that the Buddha was oblivious to political and economic circumstances and their importance to physical and spiritual well-being. Rather, for whatever system was in effect, he taught how to best make that system serve the common good.

In the case of a monarchy, responsibility lies with the ruler. Thus the Buddha said that it is the duty of a monarch to be just and to set examples of morality and self-sacrifice for his ministers, for the government officials and for the common people. Hence when a state is ruled by a king, the burden is the king's, and there are ten virtues which the monarch should develop and display:

l. Giving charity to the needy.

2. Morality in personal conduct.

3. Granting rewards to those who serve the state with loyalty.

4. Being straightforward and honest in all transactions.

5. Gentleness.

6. Restraint of sensual pursuits.

7. Non-hatred.

8. Non-violence.

9: Patience.

10. Friendship and amity.

In a democratic society responsibility rests with the people. One of the democratic states which flourished in the Buddha's time was that of the Vajjians. Once a king named Ajātasattu planned an invasion of the Vajjian nation, and on hearing this the Buddha addressed his disciple Ānanda:

"Ānanda: have you heard that the Vajjians regularly assemble together in large numbers?"

"I have so heard," Ānanda: replied, "Well, Ānanda: so long as the Vajjians assemble

regularly and in large numbers, just so long may the prosperity of the Vajjians be looked for and not their decay."

"So long, Ānanda: as the Vajjians assemble in harmony and disperse in harmony; so long as they conduct their business in harmony; so long as they introduce no revolutionary ordinance or break up no established ordinance, but abide by the law; so long as they honour, revere, esteem and worship the elders among the Vajjians and deem them worthy of listening to; so long as the women, and maidens can go about without being molested or abducted; so long as they honour, revere, esteem and worship the Vajjian shrines, both the inner and the outer …just so long as they do these things, Ānanda, may the prosperity of the Vajjians be looked for and not their decay."

None of these above examples deals with problems of population pressure and birth control. What we can glean from them, however, is that they were pragmatic, realistic and illustrated a commonsense approach to achieving common good and mutual prosperity. These same principles must now be applied to the problem of population. The mathematics is simple and the conclusion

unavoidable; Man must limit his own numbers voluntarily or nature will reduce his numbers by catastrophe: A parallel situation is mentioned in the Suttas:

> "And further, O monks, a monk reflects thus: 'Now there is an abundance of food, good harvests; easily obtainable is a meal of alms; it is easy to live on collected food and offerings. But a time will come when there will be a famine, a bad harvest, difficult to obtain will be a meal of alms: it will be difficult to live on collected food and offerings. And in famine people migrate to places where food is ample, and there habitations will be thronged and crowded. But in habitations thronged and crowded one cannot easily contemplate upon the Teachings of the Buddhas; it is not easy to live in the wilderness of a forest or jungle, or in secluded dwellings. Before this undesirable condition, so unpleasant and disagreeable, approaches me, should I not, prior to that, muster my energy for achieving the unachieved, for attaining the unattained, for realising the unrealized; so that, in the possession of that state, I shall live happily even in famine."

A significant feature of this passage is that it speaks to Buddhist monks, those who are celibate and world-renouncing. Not even they can afford to ignore the twin threats of famine and crowding.

There are several acceptable and effective techniques by which the human birth rate can be reduced. Oral contraceptives, tubal ligation, vasectomy and intrauterine devices are examples. Delayed marriage and sexual abstinence are less popular but more certain procedures. For Buddhist lay people any of these techniques are acceptable. The choice is one of economy, expediency and personal preference. It is not a religious concern *per se*.

The core of Buddhism is the Eightfold Path, and it is a path intended for householders as well as for monks. The path is a way to mental and spiritual development. One who does not give some commitment to the Path cannot truly consider himself a follower of the Buddha's teachings. The Path is a series of techniques for overcoming the basic human defilements of greed, hatred and delusion. It seeks to end egotism, and it aims to mature human beings so that they achieve stronger moral fibre and greater self-sacrifice.

Thus in an indirect but effective way the practice of the Eightfold Path should contribute to limiting

human populations. Viewed on the crudest level, babies are born as the result of sexual activity, and sexual restraint will certainly reduce the number of births. But this point of view is too limited and misses the more relevant issues. The means of birth control are now widely disseminated throughout the world. With due precautions sexual activity need not result in pregnancy. But still the birth rate is climbing. More subtle cravings than sexual cravings are involved. People have babies mostly because they want babies. Some seek to bear young to prove to themselves and to the world that they are truly male or female—"See I could do it. I am a man." This is a primitive and shallow egotism, as if the potency of one's sperm correlated with the strength of one's will or the strength of one's muscles. In fact there is no necessary correlation. But still the myth persists. Another egotistical motive is having children as extensions of one's self. One's child bears one's name and immortalises the parent. In bygone times such self-indulgences were, for the most part, socially innocuous. But now conditions have changed, and for the common good it is necessary to forgo them.

The desire to have children for the sake of love and companionship seems a bit less selfish, or at least it is a more refined and more beneficial selfishness. Children can provide an opportunity by which one

learns to love, to share, to sacrifice, to live for goals beyond one's own immediate desires. There are people who want children and who will have difficulty finding happiness without children. Such people often make excellent parents and provide home environments which enhance the moral, spiritual and intellectual growth of those fortunate enough to be their offspring.

On the other hand, there are in the world millions of unwanted and neglected children. There are children raised by neurotic and/or unloving parents. There are children born into poverty and who are seen by their parents as unwelcome burdens. Most often children raised in such families will themselves grow to be neurotic, unloving, cynical or sociopathic. But, if in the early months of their lives such unwanted infants are adopted by loving and competent parents, then they too will likely grow to be fine adults. Their presence in the world will enhance rather than degrade the quality of the human race. The concept of bad blood is a biological myth refuted by the evidence of scientific knowledge. Only in special cases are parental personality traits genetically transmitted. Most often it is a bad home life, not bad genetics, which produces bad human beings.

In a world dangerously overcrowded why should those who want children add another mouth to an

already hungry population? Is it not better to show true *mettā* (loving kindness) and compassion and adopt a child already born? In this manner no new lives are created. Instead an unwanted child finds itself wanted. A life destined for poverty and bitterness becomes a life of amity and fulfilment.

Conservation In Buddhist Perspective

It is commonly believed that arahats (saints) never perceive nor appreciate beauty. But this is not quite true. Persons who have attained Nibbāna can fully admire beauty, but they do not cling to it. It is said that they appreciate without attachment.

There are numerous episodes in the Theravāda scriptures which reveal aesthetic admiration in men of high spiritual attainment. In nearly all of these instances the beauty admired was the beauty of natural scenery. For example, there is the poem attributed to Sabbaka after his enlightenment:

Whene'er I see the crane, her clear bright wings
Outstretched in fear to flee the black storm-cloud,
A shelter seeking, to safe shelter borne,

Then doth the river Ajakarani give joy to me.
Who doth not love to see on either bank

Clustered rose-apple trees in fair array

Behind the great cave (of my hermitage)

Or hear the soft croak of the frogs, well rid
Of their undying mortal foes, proclaim:

"Not from the mountain streams isn't time today
To flit. Safe is the Ajakarani.
She brings us luck. Here is it good to be."

Psalms of the Bhikkhus, Theragāthā IV, 196.

The venerable Kassapa, another of the arahats, is the author of the following:

Those upland glades delightful to the soul,
Where the kareri spreads its wildering wreaths,
Where sound the trumpet-calls of elephants:
Those rocky heights with hue of dark blue clouds,
Where lies embosomed many a shining tarn
Of crystal-clear cool waters, and whose slopes
The "herds of Indra" cover and bedeck…

Here is enough for me who fain would dwell
In meditation rapt, mindful and tense.

Psalms of the Bhikkhus,Theragāthā
XVII,261,4.

As Buddhists we are apt to take pride in our sensitivity and attunement to nature. Unlike Western traditions, we speak of harmony with nature more than subduing, conquering and exploiting nature. Sometimes we are also proud that recent discoveries of animal behaviour have favoured the Buddhist view of man's kinship with nonhuman species. Western children are often thrilled by stories of brave hunters who confronted savage wolves, raging gorillas or ferocious lions. But now more astute and more objective reporters tell us that wolves, gorillas and lions are animals with a great capacity for loyalty and affection, both towards their own kind and towards human beings who have befriended them. Almost invariably the ferocious display of a gorilla or a bear is not an expression of belligerency. Rather it arises when the animal is cornered, frightened or in some other way feels threatened. In the end it appears that it was not the chest-beating ape nor the charging rhinoceros who was the savage killer. The true villain was the human hunter who sought to impress us with his tales of heroism. It was the hunter alone who killed

for pleasure, and he often chose as his victims normally placid animals who preferred to live and let live.

Even the intellectual gulf between man and animal may not be as wide as it once seemed. It appears that whales and porpoises have highly evolved languages, and these may be as complex or even more complex than any human language. Furthermore, we have learned that some animal species adhere to human ideals of sexual morality better than many humans. That is, animals such as gibbon apes, wolves and many species of birds form monogamous and life-long pair bonds where infidelity is almost unknown.

We use the phrase "dumb animals" partly out of our own species-oriented conceit partly out of ignorance, and partly to alleviate the guilt arising from the needless suffering we have inflicted on animals. If we regard other species as dull and insensitive, then we can more easily ignore the unpleasant truth that many animals suffer loneliness, pain, frustration and mourning just as acutely as humans.

So again I say that as Buddhists we are apt to feel a certain pride, a certain spiritual superiority, in our doctrine of compassion for all living beings. Whalers, lumbermen and real-estate developers are the obvious ecological villains, and we regard ourselves as

innocent, of the sorts of atrocities which they have committed. But, unfortunately, the issues are more complicated than this. And we, like all others, can fall victim to ignorance and pious self-deception. Assuming that our compassion is genuine and assuming that our Buddhist capacity for self-insight and self-correction is sufficiently mature, let us examine some of the ways in which our misdirected piety can defeat its own purposes. For once the matters are properly understood, we can correct our well-meaning mistakes and also alleviate unnecessary suffering more effectively. So before we examine specific cases, let us first consider some relevant biological facts.

It appears that many of the great beasts of bygone times were exterminated directly through hunting. The moa, the mammoth, Steller's sea cow, and some species of rhinoceros, elk and musk ox are examples. Yet these are exceptional cases. For every species exterminated through hunting, a great many more species have become extinct through habitat destruction. That is, the particular kind of forest, swamp or grassland in which a certain species lived was taken over for human use and eventually exhausted. There was no longer a suitable environment, and the species perished.

Most animals and plants are specialised in their

environmental requirements. When we clear the brush from a forest, the trees remain, and that gives us the illusion that nature is undisturbed. Only the trained biologist will notice that many or most species of birds and mammals have abandoned the brush-cleared woods. They have moved, on in a vain attempt to find new homes.

To an agriculturalist a ripe cornfield represents productive fulfilment. But to a biologist a cornfield is an ecological desert. In fact most kinds of desert terrain harbour greater biological diversity than do well-cultivated fields. In an unspoiled tropical rainforest a single acre of land houses thousands of different species of plants and animals, all existing in near perfect ecological balance. Some species exist in the tallest canopies of the trees. Some live in decaying leaves or deep in the soil. The forest houses parrots, monkeys, pythons, geckoes, orchids, mushrooms, ferns, mosses, frogs, deer, badgers, squirrels, etc. But when that same acreage is cleared for cultivation, there is only one species of plant of macroscopic size- i.e., corn. Where we once saw great biological complexity, we now find monotony. There is only corn, perhaps a bird or two, some ants, some spiders, worms in the soil and little else.

Most of us rarely think in these terms. We may be city-dwelling vegetarians who never kill a fly. Yet in

some place we may have never seen, land must be cultivated to feed us, and the original inhabitants of that land were driven from their homes to perish. Our spacious suburban homes were built by depriving other creatures of their homes. Our wide, neatly trimmed lawns are as ecologically barren as corn fields, and unlike corn fields, they feed no one.

The lesson is simply this: One must not entertain the pious notion that one's own existence shall never harm another's. Basic biological rules dictate that each organism exists at another's expense. Saṃsāra shall always remain imperfect. There is no utopia. But while competition, death and suffering are inevitable in saṃsāra, it is also possible to minimise suffering. The Buddha's own story is an example: Suffering cannot be reduced by hiding from its ugly realities. Only a bold and impartial confrontation with unpleasant facts enables us to understand those facts. And only when we understand the problem can we effectively deal with it.

If we want to preserve the earth's rich natural beauty and its great species diversity, then we must limit the human population. A rampant and uncontrolled increase in human population will not only destroy our natural treasures, it will ultimately harm the human species as well. I have written in these pages about a Buddhist view of the population

crisis, so I shall not repeat these points here. The population problem is a global one, and its immensity often makes us feel individually powerless. Thus for the remainder of this writing I shall focus on more specific acts which each of us can perform as fruitful expressions of Buddhist compassion. For even if the planet is inevitably rushing towards worldwide disaster, each small instance of avoided or alleviated suffering is a good thing in itself.

At animal markets and in pet stores one sometimes sees a lonely baby gibbon—malnourished, forlorn, and ready to cling affectionately to the breast of whomever will hold it. It is now illegal to sell such gibbons, but the law is too often disregarded. We feel an instant pity for the poor creature and sometimes, acting on a compassionate impulse, we buy it for a pet.

Some animal dealers are a bit like professional beggars. That is, they make their money by skilfully manipulating our compassion and evoking a sense of guilt. This in itself is not a serious offence, but the unseen consequences are gruesome and add a sinister dimension to an ostensibly innocent transaction. Baby gibbons are collected for the commercial gain in selling them. And there normally is only one way in which they are collected. The mother is shot, and after she falls to the forest floor the baby is picked from her body. Sometimes the bullet kills the baby as well as

the mother. Sometimes the baby dies in the fall. Of the infant gibbons that do survive this initial trauma, some die slowly from loneliness and mistreatment before they ever reach the pet stores. It is safe to say that for every young gibbon rescued from the animal markets, another young gibbon has perished, and that means that two mother gibbons have been killed.

We must consider economic laws as well as biological laws. If well-meaning persons did not buy wild pets, hunters would be much less inclined to collect them. And this applies to many species besides gibbons—ocelot cats, marmoset monkeys, parrots, etc. It is simple supply and demand. We act out of compassion but do not see the further consequences of our actions. There could not be a better example of the Buddhist dictum that *karuṇā* (compassion) must be balanced by *paññā* (wisdom) and *upekkhā* (tranquillity).

In several of Bangkok's monasteries are stone-banked canals where large and small turtles swim lazily in quiet waters. Lay devotees often earn merit by feeding lettuce and other vegetables to these turtles. Some persons also acquire merit by releasing captive turtles into the canals. One frequently released species is called in Thai the "yellow turtle." Since yellow is the colour of monk's garments, the yellow turtle seems especially appropriate for release in a monastery. The problem, however, is that the yellow

turtle is not really a turtle; it is a tortoise, specifically the elongate tortoise (*Testudo elongata*). It is entirely a terrestrial animal and swims only with difficulty. Thus when placed in a stone-banked canal the animal soon drowns if it does not find some place to climb above the water. Most of these "released" tortoises do manage to climb out of the water, but they are still confined to the steep-walled canal enclosure, and there they die slowly by starvation.

I once received four elongate tortoises rescued from the canals of a Bangkok monastery. I took them to a forest meditation monastery in one of the provinces. It seemed quite a suitable environment—heavily wooded with fallen leaves, mushrooms and succulent green plants during most of the year. Also, the monastery was surrounded by a high brick wall which prevented the tortoises from straying into the surrounding farmlands. For there they would likely be captured and eaten by the villagers. As an added precaution against this sort of fate, we painted on the back of each tortoise: "Released at Pah Poeng Monastery." Now, three years later, I am told that the tortoises still roam about the monastery forest.

The last time I visited Pah Poeng monastery I did not see any of the tortoises that I released, but I did find an emaciated snail-eating turtle which was nearing starvation. Though snail-eating turtles

(*Malayernys subtrijuga*) often crawl through the forests, they are primarily aquatic and feed in the water. Through misguided good intentions this turtle had been released in a forested enclosure where it could not survive. On learning of this the monks took the unfortunate turtle to another monastery located by a newly-created reservoir. There it could survive easily.

The snail-eating turtle is perhaps the most common turtle species around Bangkok, and dozens of them are sold to devotees who earn merit by releasing these captive animals in monastery canals. Again it is like the baby gibbons—the more turtles purchased the more the turtle merchants capture turtles to sell.

The Thai word for turtle, *tao*, is spelled with the Thai equivalent of a *t*, and when Thai children are taught the alphabet, each consonant is illustrated by an example. For the letter *t*, the example is "*t* is for 'turtle it eats vegetables'," and the accompanying illustration shows a turtle eating the leaves of a small marsh vine. The illustration is so firm in our minds that we often forget that many turtles are strictly carnivorous.

Carnivorous snail-eating turtles released in the monastery canals swim quietly off into the water. There are so many of them in those canals that the snails have long since vanished and the turtles slowly starve to death. Pious Buddhists regularly bring

lettuce to the canals to feed the turtles, and whenever this happens the large herbivorous turtles swim forward to take their meal. With their rigid shells it is difficult to see when turtles are skinny. So no one pays attention to the starving carnivorous turtles which do not come for their lettuce. It just seems that they are not hungry.

Even many of the herbivorous turtles perish in the monastery canals. There are so many of them that they increase the pollution of the already polluted water, and the donated vegetables are often insufficient for the number of animals. A true act of merit would be to release them in a suitable pond, reservoir or river.

However, releasing animals into a suitable wild habitat is not always an easy and straight forward solution. Again we must consider some important biological principles. For each animal species in a given forest area there is a maximum number of individuals which can live there. If that number is exceeded, the food supply is too heavily consumed and malnutrition and starvation follow. To avoid this consequence many animals establish territorial domains which they defend against other members of their same species. Thus when a region becomes too crowded, the stronger members of that species drive the weaker ones away. If those weaker members cannot find their own territory, they are quickly

expelled from one place after another until perishing from starvation and exhaustion.

A few years ago in India a trouble-making tiger was captured alive and taken to a tiger reserve where it could find a suitable home and no longer bother humans. The day after the tiger was released, it was found dead in the forest, killed by another tiger whose territory it had invaded. Tigers are large animals, and their carcasses are easily noticed. The same may happen with released monkeys, civet cats and many other small animals, yet we will never know of the tragedy which has resulted.

This is especially true of wild species raised most of their lives as pets. Usually pet animals have limited knowledge and/or skill at forest survival. They trust people and dogs and hence have not enough fear of hunters and predators. They may be less able to find food and less capable of asserting themselves against competitors.

The converse situation may occur when an exotic species is introduced into a new environment. With no natural predators or without other balancing factors, the foreign species may breed profusely upsetting the balance of nature and often exterminating native species. There are hundreds of examples—mongooses taken to Caribbean islands, goats and rats in the South

Pacific, African honey bees in South America, Asian catfish in Florida, rabbits and foxes in Australia.

The rule to be derived from the above paragraphs is that the balance of nature is complex and varies with different species and in different regions. There is much good that one can do both to help individual animals and to help save endangered species. But to obtain truly desirable results one must first understand the relevant factors in each instance.

For persons who would like to adopt a wild pet, it is best not to purchase it from an animal dealer or pet shop, for, as already shown, that only perpetuates an unhappy situation. Often people grow weary of their wild pets and seek to get rid of them. Some zoos are overburdened with these discarded wild animals and seek ways to find a home for them. Humane societies and classified newspaper advertisements are other sources through which such pets can be acquired.

Unwanted puppies and kittens are often abandoned at Buddhist monasteries. At many monasteries there is not enough food for them, so they die from malnutrition which is aggravated by severe flea and worm infestations. A few survive to adulthood, and, because no one bothers to sterilise the females, more unwanted puppies and kittens are then born. If one desires a pet or a watch-dog, an act of merit could

easily be performed by rescuing one of these young temple animals from a lean and overcrowded environment.

Once a suburban housing development is completed and the lawns, trees, gardens and hedges have been put in, it is possible to reintroduce to one's own home animals which were originally driven from the area. Squirrels, chipmunks and tree shrews, if kept in a quietly isolated garden cage, will soon feel at home in the area. Then after 10 days or so the cage door can be opened and the animals will most likely stay about the area.

On one occasion I was speaking with a highly-respected abbot of one of Bangkok's best-known monasteries. After a few minutes, a man entered with a beautifully carved ivory Buddha image. He asked if the abbot might like to purchase it for his temple. I was happily surprised when the abbot declined saying "If people buy these sorts of things, the elephants will soon become extinct."

The high price of ivory is the major factor contributing to the rapidly diminishing numbers of elephants in most parts of Africa and Asia. We see the finely carved ivory pieces in Hong Kong and Singapore and never think of the intelligent and peaceful animal which died for the sake of our

aesthetic indulgence. So we purchase at a very high price, and that increases the demand raising the incentive for more elephants to be killed. Even conservation-minded persons who know better are tempted by a once-in-a-lifetime trip to Hong Kong or other centres which sell Oriental art. “Just this once, just one small ivory piece. It can’t hurt much.” Multiply that by 10,000 other just-this-once ivory shoppers and about 500 elephants will be killed.

Many decades ago it was fashionable for ladies to wear hats with the white plumage of American egrets. The demand for egret feather hats was so great that the birds were being hunted to extinction. The egret were saved not by catching the hunters or the feather sellers. That proved to be impossible. The egret was saved instead because a law was passed which fined any lady who wore an egret-feather hat. No doubt such fashionable ladies would probably never wish to see a bird killed. Today it is not egrets which are dying through fashion. Now it is leopards and tigers. Their skins are sold for high prices in Japan as well as in affluent non-Buddhist countries.

We have already discussed the practice of capturing and selling turtles as a process of commercialised merit-making. More commonly the same is done with small birds. For a fee one is allowed to release the bird from its cage and see it fly off to freedom. It is

sometimes said that these birds are trained to return to their owners where they are caged, fed and released over and over again. if this is true, it is certainly quite rare. The great majority of the birds are either snared in nets or captured by glue-covered perches which tear the feathers from their breasts when the birds are removed. Among the most common avian groups involved in this practice are migratory finches which were snared as they travelled their annual journey. The captive birds are poorly and callously cared for, and it is common to see dead ones in the release cages. Those which are released are often too weakened to continue their migration. The non-migrants are often released too weakened or too late to feed their nestlings. In terms of the number of deaths and the amount of suffering caused, this is probably the most destructive merit-making tradition. Apparently it is not banned by law, and it should not be supported by lay Buddhists seeking easy but short-sighted ways of expressing kindness.

We could go on indefinitely discussing relevant facts of economics, biology, animal care, etc. But then we would be far from Buddhism *per se*. The Buddha-Dhamma, however, concerns life in its broadest and most fundamental aspects. Thus I hope that the above paragraphs will help some Buddhists apply their Buddhist principles in new and increasingly effective

ways; in the words of the Suttas, “for the benefit of all living creatures.”

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