

# **BUDDHISM FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

By Nicole Helmy

Next century is tomorrow. Already changes are taking place in the world around us which no longer make the description of next century a mere exercise in science fiction. Perhaps the most exciting and most striking feature of the era at our doorsteps is that it is going to be a planetary era.

Two world wars bringing in their wake the threat of planetary annihilation in the event of a third generalized conflict have brought home to man the urgency of the notion of unity: If he wants to live he must think 'planet'. Survival lies in unity and nowhere else.

In fact this idea of the necessity of unity is not such a new one since it received a first attempt at realization after the signature of the Versailles Treaty ending the 1914-16 war when the Allies formed the "Societe des Nation". However, this organization was self-defeating for it did not create any real unity among nations if only because it excluded a great number of them. This failure at achieving any unity was one of the deep-seated causes of the next world war. After Hiroshima, the gloomy conviction started to dawn on men's minds that, if they were unable to live in unity, they could be pretty sure that they would die in unison. Beginning with the foundation of the United Nations Organisation, the last twenty five years or so have seen a succession of landmarks towards the establishment of world unity. Economical associations have spring up everywhere, in Europe, both East and West, and in the Americas. Cultural and technical skills are being exchanged in the form of aid to developing nations and trade and cultural agreements. The old concept of individual nations is bursting at the seams. People see themselves in teams of continents or of ideological blocks. Hopefully, the growing urgency of the suppression of even these last divisions is deeply felt by many statesmen. Although inauguration day for the planetary age is still some distance ahead, there have been recently some very encouraging events such as the rapprochements between the United States on the one hand and Russia and China on the other, as well as the welcoming of the latter among the United Nations.

This need for unity translates itself also into the great economical and Social pressures all over the world where it is felt as the necessity of sharing among all the available resources. In a country like Britain, the United States or Australia for instance, we see the Trade Unions militating in favour of ever increasing wages. This puts enormous burdens on private industry which tries to transfer these burdens on the consumer by soaring prices. The consumer is becoming

more and more angry at the situation so that a possible solution lies only in private industry accepting a lesser profit margin, in other words the wealthiest sharing more equally the resources. The welfare state is another means by which governments seek to achieve social and economical unification.

On a different level, this theme of world unity is already part of the background of our everyday life: communication is so quick that news of all over the world can reach us in a few hours and supersonic jets take us in only a few hours to the other end of the earth. Even in his adventures and heroes, man is planetary: no longer can he be content to explore the next door continent, he has to leave his planet altogether if he wants to be taken at all seriously. Today he walks on the Moon, tomorrow on Mars, Venus and the other planets, soon even further away.

Another striking feature of tomorrow's world is that it could be one of leisure. Man will have increasing leisure because he achieved one of his most genial inventions: the computer. Already with the industrial revolution, the machine had taken over many of man's physical chores, not only in the factory, on the building site and in transportation, but even in the private home. Now the computer is rendering the same service for man's intellectual chores such as control, planning, calculations, statistics, etc.

Thus freed from physical and intellectual drudgery, man can then exercise fully and freely his higher, specifically human faculties such as creativity and intuition. This trend has been perceptible in many countries for a number of years with providing the education to enable people to use their increased leisure and the facilities to do so. Man can now become what he was meant to be, a divine being, creating beauty, exercising compassion for all living beings and really fulfilling his responsibilities as the highest creature in nature. As we Buddhists would put it, man can now become a Buddha.

In as much as every human being is a potential Buddha and Buddhism a teaching for the realization of man's highest possibilities. Buddhism is really a teaching for the twenty-first century. Let us also remember that Buddhism has been, from the first, a planetary religion. Essentially democratic in its outlook, it insisted that every human being, regardless of cultural, social or national background, can become enlightened. Indeed, the Buddha sought in the first place to react against contemporary Hinduism where spiritual enlightenment had become the exclusive preserve of the brahmanical caste. The Mahayana philosophy of Buddhism goes even further when the Bodhisattva vows that he will enter Nirvana only after "the last blade of grass" has done so. Buddhism, above all is planetary in its teaching of the unity of all life.

Modern theories and knowledge concur in most aspects with Buddhism in their view of man and the world he lives in. As to the "why's" and "where's" of

man's existence, if there is any difference, it is only one of words. Modern theories speak of happiness, Buddhism speaks of enlightenment as the goal of human life. Both agree that the aim certainly does not lie in any selfish accumulation of possessions or of enjoyments. The methods to this aim may differ, even though we find some thought providing parallelisms and similarities, in psychotherapy and the social sciences on the one hand, and Buddhism on the other.

We live in an environment which is in perpetual motion, in ceaseless transformation, in endless evolution. According to the Buddha, the first sign or characteristic of being is change (**anicca**). This is true on the most superficial level: the weather changes and climatic conditions tend to become either drier and hotter, or damper and colder. The natural landscape is slowly but steadily altered by erosion. These are only a few very obvious examples. Science, not content with empirical truth, sets out on its journey towards the ultimate unchanging absolute element but comes to a similar conclusion: All and everything changes all the time. The atom, which for a long time, was thought to be such an ultimate element of matter (according to its Greek etymology it means that which cannot be cut), is now seen as a combination of forces interacting energies. What appears to the eye as a very real, compact stone, for instance, is in reality only a very momentary condensation of forces interacting a given field. These forces as seen in biological evolution, magnetism, electricity, nuclear field, display consistency, organizational and selective power, mutual attraction and repulsion, in what appears to be intelligence. So we are left with some very abstract concepts, forces expressing themselves in a space/time continuum. Even this notion of space time explodes when we try to observe what is happening outside our galaxy for example. There we encounter such magnitudes that it can only be measured in terms of time, such as light-years. By the time messages from outer space reach us the information conveyed is no more relevant because their source has already undergone eternities of transformations! What we can say is that the world we live in is a manifestation of forces in a time/space continuum subject to the laws of cause and effect. Here we are very close indeed to the Buddhist doctrine of **Sunyata** or emptiness. Let us borrow Dr. D. T. Suzuki's definition of **Sunyata** (Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism): "Emptiness signifies, negatively, the absence of particularity, the non-existence of individuals as such, and positively, the over-changing state of the phenomenal world, a constant flux of becoming, an eternal series of causes and effects."

Now, if we take an overall look at man's position in the universe, we see first of all that he is an end-product of evolution. His biological structure and functions have attained a degree of perfection unknown in any other species. He can move not only on dry land, but even in water. He can adapt to widely different climatic conditions and survive on widely different diets. He has organs which

enable him to communicate with all aspects of his environment, he can receive and process light and sound vibrations, information about temperatures, touch, so that, in turn, he can act on his environment, and transform it. At this point, we may remember that the Buddha, no more than a human being, has been called the “teacher of both gods and men”, which emphasizes the prominent place Buddhism assigns to man. And the modern notion of man as a microcosm in the macrocosm is conveyed in this saying of the Buddha: “Within this fathom-long body, equipped with sense perception and mind, I declare unto you is the world, the creation of the world, the cessation of the world and the way to its cessation.” Man’s psychological personality may be divided into three broad areas if we borrow K. Jung’s terminology. (Most would agree that Jung’s discoveries are still the most enlightening in the field of psychology). There is the unconscious mind (corresponding to the subpersonal conscious in the Buddhist Abidharma) which comprises the collective unconsciousness (where memories of past lives are stored according to Buddhism) and the personal unconsciousness. Next there comes the conscious mind (Abidharma: the peripheral consciousness) and thirdly the Self (Abidharma: subliminal consciousness). Dynamically, the human personality is composed of instincts on the unconscious level; emotions, feelings and ideas on the conscious level, (with roots in the unconscious mind); intuitions and higher aspirations on the Self or subliminal level. These components are in turn influenced and transformed by interpersonal and environmental factors. So that we come to a similar conclusion, that man is a fluctuating combination of forces in the space/time continuum. This view leaves no room for an abiding soul and we meet once more the Buddha’s teaching of “**Anatta**” (Soullessness) and that man too is (“**Sunyata**”) (empty).

We now come to the ethical and philosophical implications of these facts and opinions. We have seen that the personality is a dynamic process striving towards an end to which we may give the way general name of happiness, of fulfillment. Happiness or fulfillment can have different meanings to different persons. In a first category we shall classify the striving towards material possessions, sensual and aesthetical gratification, self-aggrandisement or a combination of those. In the second category, we shall place the aspiration towards enlightenment, realization of the higher self etc. In the first category, man has achieved some measure of success such as wealth, power, great works of art. But it is also in the category that we see man’s great failures; war, crime, mental illness, and even boredom and general dissatisfaction with life.

Nowadays, as always, some of the greatest minds are preoccupied with these problems and one common cause to emerge for all man’s failures; division or alienation. Wars erupt all over the world because people are divided on ideological, racial, religious or cultural grounds. The criminal commits his crimes to punish society because he unconsciously thinks that society has

rejected him. Neurosis is a state of war within the personality where the unconscious acts against the conscious mind.

The solution to all these problems can also be defined in one word; unity or integration. Peace talks seek to unite peoples by finding common interests, be it economically, politically or culturally. Criminals, at least in some cases, are given psychological treatment and education in order to reintegrate them into a social milieu. Psychotherapy seeks to reintegrate the patient in his own interpersonal environment on the one hand, and to unify his personality as a whole by submitting the unconscious mind to the searching of the conscious mind. Once again, interesting thoughts on this subject come from K. Jung;

“If we picture the conscious mind with the ego as its centre, as being opposed to the unconscious, and if now add to our mental picture the process of assimilating the unconscious, we can think of this assimilation as a kind of approximation of conscious and unconscious, where the centre of the total personality no longer coincides with the ego, but with a point midway between the conscious and the unconscious. This would be the point of a new equilibrium, a new centering of the personality, a virtual centre which, on account of its focal position between conscious and unconscious ensures for the personality a new and more solid foundation.”

In Jung’s view the conscious mind comprises not only the ego, but also the Self or subliminal consciousness. The higher Self gradually “assimilates” and sublimates the unconscious and the ego. This process is in reality meditation, since when we meditate we seek to become conscious and master of the least processes of our mind (Mindfulness) and thus realize that there is no dualism between the ego and the other, between man and the world but only One Mind, and thus become truly enlightened, a Buddha.

So we see that the ultimate message of modern knowledge coincides with that of Buddhism, the only difference perhaps being one of degree: true happiness, the aim of human life, is spiritual enlightenment. But modern knowledge is only at the brink of discovering that there is, beyond or rather immanent to the material and psychological reality, a spiritual reality. When it does discover this, it will agree with Buddhism and, for that matter, with all great spiritual teachings, that THOU ART THAT.