

IS BUDDHISM A HINDRANCE TO MODERN PROGRESS?

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Today progress is measured by different yardsticks by different peoples. The Western Civilizations adopt material and mundane values to evaluate progress; whilst the Asian civilizations use moral and religious values. This is the fundamental approach to the concept of progress. So the basic difference begins. To the Europeans progress means the development of material resources by advanced technical, technological and scientific processes; the emphasis being on materialism. The Asians, generally measure progress in terms of moral and religious values; the emphasis being on the spiritual. The Buddhists especially consider the development of the mind as the highest form of progress. In this regard material and scientific progress are only means towards the cultivation of the mind.

This does not by any means indicate that Buddhists are averse to material advancement through modern processes. They do accept that modern knowledge helps greater understanding of physical processes whilst still acknowledging the supremacy of the mind. They accept the fact that man's advancement in the material sphere has been achieved in a remarkable way by the conquest of nature and his environment. But the Buddhist point of view is that that alone is inadequate if man were to overcome his animal instincts and lustful actions.

Buddhists try to attain progress of mind and matter simultaneously. One without the other is bound, ultimately, to lead to catastrophic results, through an imbalance of values. Hence Buddhists recognize the universality of life, alike in man and animal, as inseparable and indivisible. They believe, therefore, that lasting human progress should be attained without sacrifice of human or animal life and without impairing moral and spiritual values.

It is because of this view that Buddhism is sometimes said to be a hindrance to progress. Such critics level a similar charge against most Asian and Far-Eastern Societies. This arises because of one of the five precepts (**panca-sila**) of Buddhism which prohibits the taking of life in any form. Here life means living organisms of the highest and lowest orders.

The charge leveled against Buddhists states is that economic progress of these states is hindered due to the observance of this cardinal tenet of Buddhism. In present day societies one of the most rewarding economic exercises is the

manufacture of weapons of human destruction. The use of the most advanced lethal weapons leads to destruction of human life and suffering to millions of human beings by senseless wars for power and domination. In any war there is neither a victor nor vanquished. Both parties are losers in the end. And the subsequent efforts to repair financial resources of all concerned. Even thereafter hatred does not cease and no mental satisfaction is ever gained by any participant. Once again the longing for power and domination returns. The certain remedy for this human malady is the moral conquest and spiritual upliftment of all humanity and the recognition of the sanctity of all life.

Another serious charge leveled against Buddhist societies is that certain very profitable pursuits of economic progress are prohibited to them. Hence they are underdeveloped and backward. These economic pursuits are fisheries, stock raising and poultry keeping. In order to get the maximum profits from these trades killing of animals becomes essential. But the Buddhists must refrain from killing. They accept the fact that life is the most precious possession of man and animal alike. The advanced scientific view, too, is that the difference between human and animal life is negligible biologically. Hence no human being can justify, on moral or any other grounds, the slaughter of animals even for economic gain.

In the ultimate analysis the food values derived from animal and vegetable food are very similar in content. If therefore man can live a good life in good health on a vegetarian diet why is it not possible for some men to live the same. Why is it not possible to develop and exploit the vegetable resources and potential of land and sea for obtaining human food. Only the food habits require to be changed. That is again a matter of the mind. Societies should be re-oriented economically to obtain its food without killing. This is possible with a change of heart and attitude of mind having regard to the sanctity of all life. Then the society can be organized on different values where the cultivation of the mind means progress and human advancement.

It has been repeated time and again that with the spectacular achievements of modern science and technology man is neither satisfied nor happy. He is restless. He is frustrated. His mind longs for peace and happiness. The several movements of going back to nature developing among the youth in the western world is a reaction to the material progress of the West. They are in search of something which wealth and sensual pleasure cannot give. Surely the so called progressed societies enjoy the highest sensual pleasures but the men and women are really not happy. Why? Because they lack mental happiness. It is that all satisfying mental and spiritual state that eludes them in their modern way of life and so called progress. It will always elude the men and women of the materially advanced societies until and unless these are re-oriented economically and morally. The new bases, where killing of man and animal has

no place and where spiritual and moral values are accepted as supreme, can usher the new era leading to peace and happiness. It is in this respect that Buddhism stands supreme. Buddha's message is to refrain from killing and evil, to do good and to cultivate the mind.

If human happiness in its true sense is to be attained in this world the concept of progress based purely on material and economic advancement has to be radically changed, modified or abandoned altogether. New cultural and moral values should be adopted. Sanctity of all life must be recognized. The backwardness and underdevelopment of Asian and other societies should not be attributed to their religious or moral values; but are certainly due to historical circumstances. For in most of the Buddhist societies it is colonial domination during nearly four centuries of European rule, and economic exploitation which impoverished these States and stultified the natural progress by radically changing their way of life and their social and cultural and religious pattern. The Western colonial powers indoctrinated their minds and exploited them. It is their prime duty to decolonize these people now. The colonial powers should take the blame for their past actions and not attempt to find fault in other social patterns, moral standards or religious tenets. It is surprising to know that some of these western powers have on occasions considered Buddhism a hindrance to their kind of progress. If the same persons wish to realise the eternal truth about life and happiness let them, too, seek them in the Buddha Dhamma and their efforts will most certainly be able to find eternal peace and supreme happiness through Buddhism and the Buddhist way of life.

