

# **SENSUALISTIC SOCIAL TRENDS AND BUDDHISM IN MODERN TIMES**

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*Is Buddhism a nihilistic religion concerned with denying man's natural tendency to recognize the pleasures of the senses? Many ignorant people and critics of the religion would like to believe so. Prof Lily de Silva effectively argues that Buddhism, as a truly rational religion encourages those who decide to follow the lives of laymen to understand their natures, to wisely enjoy the pleasures of the senses and to live a noble life in purity, dignity and restraint.*

– Ed.

## **Causes for Sensualistic Social Trends**

Scientific and technological advancement has brought about wide-spread changes in the lifestyle of modern man. Changes have been so rapid and overwhelming during the 20th Century that this century seems to far outweigh all other centuries put together in this respect. Man's attitudes, values, goals and ideals too have undergone radical change. Scientific knowledge regarding the nature and evolution of the universe, man, society, culture and civilization has unsettled many of the old certitudes and undermined the very basis and authority of the Western theistic religious traditions. With the loss of respect for authority and tradition, validity of moral values too came to be questioned. Ever renewing scientific knowledge which exposed traditional beliefs one after another as superstitious or mythical gave a halo of superiority to modernity. Nurtured in such an environment, the younger generation became alienated from the lifestyle of their parents and the age-old generation gap assumed unprecedented proportions.

While scientific knowledge rendered man a sceptic, alienated from his cultural heritage, technology robbed him of his creative ability. The machine with its vast powers of production reduced man to a button pusher and threw millions of workers out of employment. Their muscular and creative powers were left unharnessed, thwarted and frustrated. As a result the indigenous folk arts and crafts of all nations, which were in fact expressions of sublimated emotions, became almost extinct. Man in his admiration for creativity and feeble struggle for self-expression has now become an antique collector.

The next force which completely overwhelmed modern man was the tyranny of commercialization and advertising. When production exceeded consumption man had to be persuaded into consuming more, lest trade suffers with a backlog of unconsumed stockpiles. Deliberate and calculated attempts were made to change traditional frugality into an ethic of consumption. Mass media were utilised to convince the people of the virtues and necessity of increasing consumption to maintain the newly acquired standard of affluent living. Research into motivational and behavioural psychology betrayed the susceptibilities of man, and advertising agents made capital by playing upon these weaknesses, namely man's innate greed for sensual pleasure, personal property and social prestige. Unleashed as he was from his cultural moorings, and frustrated as he was in his creative urge, modern man succumbed to the attractive appeals of mass media and plunged into a life of self-indulgence.

### **Manifest III – Effects on Individual and Society**

Having thus briefly outlined the main causes responsible for modern sensualistic social trends, it is useful to glance at the effects they have produced on the individual and society of today. Venereal diseases have become rampant, it is reported that there was an increase of 300% within one decade in the United States. The ever widening field of psychiatry shows that mental health is rapidly deteriorating. Alcoholism and drug addiction are major health problems. The crime rate is ever mounting. Bonds of wedlock have become sadly brittle and the divorce rate is alarmingly high. The family as a viable institution is threatened, according to some sociologists, with extinction in the not too distant future. Disruption of family life has affected child life most pathetically. A British Report of Health Economics published in January 1976 informs that babies are the most common homicide victims in Britain since the early 1960s. They are battered to death at times of family stress. Teenage drug addiction and juvenile delinquency have become alarming problems of the day. These social phenomena are directly related to man's attitude towards sense pleasure and serious rethinking seems most urgent today if man is to be saved from the imminent danger of self-destruction through sensuality.

### **Can Buddhism Help?**

Buddhism has been a great civilizing force and a guiding principle for millions of people during the last 25 centuries. It would be useful to see what light Buddhism sheds on the present chaotic situation, and what wisdom it offers for self-adjustment under modern conditions and for healthy family and interpersonal relations. Though criticism is often levelled that Buddhism is a life-denying ascetic ideal, and that it is antisocial and anti-political it would be remembered that Buddhism embraces in its dispensation not only monks (**bhikkhu**) and nuns (**bhikkhuni**), but also male and female lay followers

(upasakaupasika). The intellectual and disciplinary training of the laity is as important a concern in Buddhism as that of the monks. Therefore Buddhism offers a social and a political philosophy, the goal of which is the creation of a society where human rights are safeguarded, human enterprise is the key to success, resources are well distributed and justice reigns supreme. As Trevor Ling too maintains, Buddhism is not just a religion or a philosophy, it is in fact, a whole civilization, a full-fledged multi-faceted philosophy of life, designed to meet the secular and spiritual needs of man.

### **Sensuality and Human Ambitions**

According to Buddhism, ambitions of man centre round the acquisition of pleasure, fame, longevity and happiness after death. Accepting these as human aspirations and goals of human endeavour, Buddhism advocates a way of life to help man realise these aims. For, the danger is ever present that man in his pursuit of pleasure will in the long run, defeat these very aims. Wealth and sex are two important means of acquiring pleasure. A prudent attitude towards them would go a long way for the realisation of the other three human ambitions as well. As most of the social ills of today are attributable to the mishandling of these two, a correct understanding of the Buddhist attitude towards them would be most profitable.

### **Wealth**

The Buddhist attitude towards wealth is such that it has never prescribed a ceiling on income. What it has prescribed is that wealth should be acquired through righteous means and expended also in a righteous manner. Wealth earned by the sweat of one's brow without harming, deceiving or exploiting others is highly commended. It is always emphasised that wealth has only instrumental value, it should be utilised for (a) living in comfort making one's family, parents, dependents and friends happy, (b) insuring oneself against possible calamities through fire, water etc. (c) performing one's duties by relatives, guests, state, and for religion-cultural activities; and (d) patronising those engaged in spiritual advancement. According to one's means, on a large or very small scale one should try to make the best use of one's resources in the most righteous manner. What is deplored in Buddhism is the excessive acquisitive greed and the hoarding habit. While niggardliness is held in contempt, frugality is extolled as a virtue. Wastefulness is a deplorable habit and it is even regarded as anti-social. Once **Ananda** explained to a king how the monks put the gifts offered to them to maximum use. When new robes are offered the old ones are taken as coverlets, the old coverlets are utilised as mattress covers, the former mattress covers are used as rugs, the old rugs are taken as dusters, the old tattered dusters are kneaded with clay and used to repair cracked floors and walls. Such was the Buddhist monks' conscientious

use of resources. The same frugality has influenced the laity too and the famous episode of a wealthy merchant, who bade a servant to collect a drop of ghee off the floor, lest it be wasted, is a fine example. The same merchant was so generous that his largesse surprised the recipients. Though frugality and generosity appear to be incompatible they are recognised as commendable virtues on their own right to be cultivated by one and all. When these simple virtues are compared with the information revealed, for instance, by Vance Packard's epoch-making eye-opener **The Waste Makers**, one begins to wonder whether sanity and common sense have left the knowledgeable man of science today. Fairfield Osborn estimates that American consumption of world's resources within 40 years is equal to what mankind has consumed during the last 4000 years. As the earth's resources are not unlimited, it is high time that modern man did some re-thinking and cultivated some economical Buddhist habits at least out of sympathy for posterity. It is true that oceanography opens unexploited resources to man, but it must be remembered that the ocean too is not unlimited, whereas man's greed knows no limit or satiation.

## **Sex**

Buddhism recognises the sex attraction as a universal reality. Among animals the sex impulse is regulated by nature and their mating and breeding are seasonal. Among humans there is no such natural mechanism, and man has by a long process of experiment and adjustment arrived at certain taboos, rules and regulations to handle his sex drive in a manner appropriate to himself and his fellow beings. Though these rules differ according to time and place, on the whole they have helped man to emerge from savagery to civilization. The family is the social institution which was thus born.

According to Buddhism monogamy is the ideal form of marriage, while chastity and fidelity form ideal behaviour before and after marriage. This alone is not sufficient for success in married life. Mutual confidence (**saddha**), morality (**sila**), self-denial (**caga**) and prudence (**panna**) are emphasized as virtues which ensure conjugal happiness and success. In other words mutual confidence means dependability, morality implies strength of character, self-denial or the joy of selfless service to the beloved denotes emotional maturity, and prudence shows intellectual maturity. These qualities bring the spouses so close to one another, it is said, that the relationship could persist even after death in a future existence. **Nakula's** parents are portrayed in Buddhist literature as an ideal couple, who, in their old age, expressed the wish that their love should survive death. Buddha replied that the wish would materialise if the above qualities are equally shared by both partners.

Marital bonds of modern man are so brittle and fragile because of these cohesive emotional forces are lost in sensuality. Much emphasis is laid on

carnal pleasure while personality adjustments and emotional involvement which call for sacrifices and selflessness respectively, are ignored or neglected. Though sex is an important basic requirement in marriage, it is certainly not the be-all and end-all of family life. Indulgence in sex for its own sake never brings satisfaction, whence fulfilment? The insatiability of lust is disdainfully illustrated in Buddhist literature by the traditional simile of a dog licking a bone to satisfy hunger. But sex as an expression of conjugal love is a satisfying emotional experience. If sex was the only concern man need not have evolved an institution like the family. Animals too satisfy their sex instinct, but nothing compared to the human family has evolved, in the animal kingdom. The important function of family life seems to be to teach man a great moral lesson to overcome his ego-centric nature. Man starts life in his mother's womb as the most selfish parasite. He then passes through the emotional stages of self-love, conjugal love and parental love. As a mature man and a parent he completely loses himself in the service of his offspring. His self-denial is such; he even relinquishes his personal possessions, acquired through the toil of a life time, in favour of them. Finally he makes an emotional self-sacrifice when he gets a partner for his child to love and cherish. In his old age he regards his offspring with equanimity and contentment. This emotional maturity and fulfilment is utterly impossible if sensuality is regarded as the goal of married life.

### **Fame and Longevity**

These two ambitions of man depend to a very large extent, as mentioned earlier, on the manner he handles his wealth and pleasure. Special mention should be made that liquor, like sensuality, is a great betrayer of all human ambitions. It has been aptly remarked that a man's conscience is soluble in alcohol. According to Buddhism both liquor and sensuality destroy man's physical and mental health, drain his resources, spoil his public image and distort his intellectual capacities.

### **Happiness after Death**

In this age of material pleasure, man is not much concerned with a life after death. The Buddhist axiom is that a man reaps what he sows. If one has led a useful moral life and reached old age with a sense of fulfilment, contentment and equanimity, one has no regrets. A well-spent blameless life has, according to Buddhism, happiness beyond the grave. Such a person is said to progress from light to brighter light. (**jotijoti-parayano**).

### **Sensuality and Intellectual Maturity**

Another noteworthy ill effect of self-indulgence is the inhibition of intellectual capacities. Buddhism emphasizes that obsession with sensuality prevents clear thinking, distorts vision, clouds issues, inhibits wisdom and destroys peace of

mind. While these observations were made 25 centuries ago by the Buddha, the inhibitory effect of sex on brain activity seems to be indicated quite independently by medical research on the pineal gland.

In man, the pineal gland is a pear-shaped midline structure located at the back of the base of the brain. This gland synthesises a hormone called melatonin which affects behaviour, sleep, brain activity and sexual activity such as puberty, ovulation and sexual maturation. While melatonin stimulates brain activity, it inhibits sexual activity. Again it has been recognised that light, dark olfaction, cold, stress and other neural inputs affect the pineal function. Exposure to light reduces the synthesis of melatonin and depresses pineal weight. On the other hand light accelerates sexual maturation and activity.

It will be useful to compare this medical information with Buddhist ideology. Buddhism maintains that sense stimuli disturb mental activity. If the sense doors are well guarded (**indriyesu guttadvaro hoti**) i.e. if visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory and tactile inputs are controlled, a corresponding degree of concentrated mental activity becomes possible. **Cittassa ekaggata** or the ability to fix the mind on one point is greatly determined by the control of sense faculties. In terms of physiology it seems to mean that such sense control helps the synthesis of melatonin in the pineal gland which stimulates brain activity and retards sexual activity. Thus, with the help of medical research it seems possible to confirm the Buddhist point of view that sensuality inhibits intellectual maturity.

### **Sensuality and Culture**

According to the **Aggannasutta** which gives an account of the evolution of the world and society the earliest inhabitants of the earth were mind-made self-luminous beings who subsisted on joy and moved about in the sky. After a long time they tasted something extremely flavoursome and were delighted with this new gustatory sense experience. Craving entered into them and they went on tasting food in this manner. Consequently their bodies became coarser and coarser, they lost their radiance and the ability to subsist on joy and traverse in the sky.

Now what is important for us here is not the authenticity of this evolutionary process, but the point that sensual desire has caused the loss of higher mental and physical capacities which man is supposed to have once possessed.

The **Cakkavattisihanadasutta** deals with the problem of social change. As a result of the unequal distribution of wealth, poverty becomes widespread and moral standards deteriorate rapidly. With moral degeneration there is a corresponding decrease in physical beauty and length of life. As times goes on and immorality settles down, society comes under the grip of three derogatory

phenomena, namely perverted lust (**adhammarage**), wanton greed (**visamalobha**) and a wrong sense of values (**micchadhamma**). Disrespect for family, religious and cultural traditions become an accepted social phenomenon. When moral degradation continues thus a time will come when life-span is reduced to 10 years and the marriageable age gets down to 5. By that time food will undergo so much change that delicacies such as ghee, butter, honey etc. will vanish, and what is considered coarse today will be a delicacy of that time. All concepts of morality will disappear and language will have no word to denote morality. Immorality will reign supreme with social sanction. There will be no marriage laws nor kin-ship, and society will fall into a state of utter promiscuity, as among animals. Among such humans keen mutual enmity will become the rule, and they will be overcome by passionate thoughts of killing one another. A world war will break out and large scale massacre would be the result. After this mass blood bath, the few destitute who are left behind will find solace in each other's company and they will begin to regard one another with kindly thoughts. With this change in heart there will be a gradual re-evolution of moral values. Step by step the good life will be restored, physical beauty will reappear and life-span will increase. Mental potentialities too will gradually develop.

Such are the Buddhist ideas of social change. Society stands or falls with the rise or fall of moral values.

It is noteworthy that some present-day sociological studies too have revealed that morality and culture are causally connected. William Stephens observes that primitive tribes have great sexual freedom, premarital and/or extramarital, when compared with civilized communities who have tight sex restrictions. Dean Robert Fitch has connected the decline of the Roman civilization with the deterioration of their sexual morality. The most important contribution in this respect is made by J.D. Unwin in a study called *Sex and Culture*. He has conducted a survey of the sexual behaviour and the level of culture of 80 uncivilized tribes and also those of 6 known civilizations. He concludes that there is a definite relationship between permissiveness and primitiveness, and sex restrictions and civilization. Sexual freedom gives rise to what he calls a zoistic (dead level of conception) culture where people are born, they satisfy their desire, they die and are forgotten after the remains are disposed of. They are not able to rationally find out the causal connection between events. When afflicted by, for instance, illness, they resort to witchcraft and nothing more. When a certain degree of sex restriction, occasional, premarital or post-nuptial, is present, the result is a manistic culture where ancestors are worshipped at times of crisis, but without a definite place of worship. Strict sex regulations as in monogamy produce a deistic culture with definite places of worship. Culture in the sense of the external expression of internal human energy resulting from the use of human powers of reason, creation and self-knowledge becomes

possible only with strictly enforced monogamous sex mores. The mechanism of this operation is not known, just as it is not known how carbon placed under different settings turns to coal or diamond. All that can be said is that there is a definite causal link between sexual behaviour and the culture pattern. As Unwin comes to this conclusion after conducting exhaustive methodical investigations it is possible to maintain that scientific inquiries too have confirmed the Buddhist point of view regarding the relationship between morality and culture.

### **Sensuality and Environment**

The **Anguttaranikaya** maintains that rainfall decreases when society comes under the sway of perverted lust, wanton greed and wrong values. Drought causes famine as a result of which the mortality rate goes up. Though it is difficult to establish a direct connection between immorality and lack of rain, an interpretation of the five natural laws mentioned in the commentaries might offer a plausible explanation.

In the cosmos there are five natural laws or forces, namely **utuniyama** (lit. season-law), **bijaniyama** (lit. seed-law), **cittaniyama**, **kammaniyama** and **dhammaniyama** and these can be translated as physical laws, biological laws, psychological laws, moral laws and causal laws. While the first four laws operate within their respective spheres, the last law of causality operates within them as well as among them. Thus the physical environment or ecology affects living organisms, i.e. biology, this influences psychology which determines the moral force. The opposite process also operates with harmful or beneficial results depending on the nature of the forces at work. Perhaps the operation can be illustrated with an example. Man's greed for luxury, wealth and power has caused the setting up of vast factories. They created the problems of air, water and noise pollution, which have adversely affected both fauna and flora. The inadvertent modification of atmospheric properties and processes; caused by human activities is intensely studied by scientific bodies today. It is complained that although the effects of pollutants and smog upon people, plants and economic activities have been extensively studied, relatively little attention has been paid to the effects of pollution and smog upon climatic patterns. It is well known that many climatic elements such as radiation, cloudiness, fog, visibility and the atmospheric electric field are affected by pollution. Temperature and humidity are influenced indirectly and effects on precipitation are also suspected. Science will reveal in the course of time whether pollution is definitely responsible for weather and climatic changes, but it remains a fact that the world is already confronted with an acute shortage of water.

It is no secret that man uses his inherent powers of reason, intelligence and creativity to change his environment for his advantage. But man is not aware



that the moral force he himself creates brings about corresponding changes in his environment to his weal or woe whether he likes it or not.

## **Conclusion**

Concluding this essay it should be emphasized that there is a Cosmic Moral Force which profoundly influences man. According to Buddhism it is this Cosmic Moral Law or Force which makes the world and mankind go on. (**Kammaṇa vattati loka, kammaṇa vattati paṇa**). This Cosmic Moral Force is generated by none other than man himself, for the Buddha maintains that human thoughts are a moral force (**cetanaham bhikkave kammaṇa vadami**). It is also more directly said that thoughts (or ideologies) make the world go on (**cittananiyatiloka**). Therefore man has to discover his own inherent powers which are, at present, mostly dissipated in alcohol and sensuality. The discovery of the potentialities of **The World Within** is the most urgent need of today as modern man living in **Sick Cities**, lost in a **Sexual Wilderness**, unaware of **The Hidden Persuaders** is being slowly but surely reduced to a **Naked Ape**.