

## THE BUDDHIST VIEW OF THE CONTEMPORARY SITUATION

By Ven. Narada Maha Thera

*Many people believe that man with all his intelligence, technological know-how, scientific knowledge and inventions, has almost reached the zenith of material progress. But looking at him in depth many also feel that he is almost morally bankrupt. For inherently latent in him are the three roots of evil – lobha (lust), dosa (hatred) and moha (ignorance) – which are in the words of the Ven. Narada Maha Thera ‘solely responsible for all the ills of life prevalent in this world’. ‘Until and unless these three universal evil roots are either eradicated or attenuated and their opposite virtues – generosity, loving-kindness and wisdom – fully developed,’ he says, ‘no peace and real happiness can ever be guaranteed’. This is the Buddhist view of the contemporary situation.*

*The silver lining behind this dark cloud is the genuine hope that man, who has the capacity to look within himself, will develop those latent, inner, excellent virtues such as loving-kindness and compassion and thus radiate true peace and happiness among all human beings.*

*Thus when the spiritual wisdom of the East meets with the scientific knowledge of the West, all peoples on earth, irrespective of caste, religion, colour or nationality can live together in perfect harmony as citizens of one world.*

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This war-weary, restless world appears to be almost morally bankrupt, although, no doubt, it has nearly reached the zenith of material progress. The ingenuity of modern man has created marvels in every sphere of life, except, perhaps, in the moral sphere. Seldom, if ever, do we hear of Saints of any faith today.

Scientists, on the contrary, have advanced so amazingly in their respective fields that some have even gone to the extent of prostituting science to cause irreparable loss and indescribable suffering to millions of men, women and

children. Ordinary bombs that rained from heaven above have become obsolete. The after-effects of the atom-bomb are still lingering in our compassionate hearts. H-bombs and combat bombs are ready to be brought into action at any inauspicious moment. We doubt very much whether we would be spared the experience from the disastrous effects of other bombs named after the remaining letters of the alphabet that scientists have yet to discover.

Materialistic-minded military leaders, on the other hand, probably owing to their greed for power and pride of position, are sacrificing the most precious thing on earth – life – the altar of brute force for the sake of personal prestige or for the sake of insignificant bits of useless earth.

As a result of this deplorable situation in world affairs today, it is the poor and helpless that suffer most; brilliant sons perish in their prime of youth, while “merchants of death” thrive on their profits derived from the victory of death over life.

While Peace Conferences, World Congress of Faiths and so forth are being held, motivated by high principles, nations – great and small – are arming themselves to the teeth, suspicious and mortally afraid of one another.

The selfless sponsors and leaders of peaceful conferences are certainly to be congratulated on their laudable efforts to establish peace and happiness amongst mankind. But one is tempted to question whether these peace conferences, inspiring addresses, and persuasive articles will ever leave any impression on the government of nations and the people who control the lives of others or whether they will serve any practical purpose. Will these protests made by a few well-meaning people in peaceful isolated halls produce any appreciable effect on the aggressive militant powers – both political and religious – that aspire to rule this world not by love and right but by force and might?

Who are to be blamed for this deplorable state of affairs in this deluded world?

None but man himself. Man makes or unmakes the world. Man creates his own heaven; man creates his own hell. He himself is his creator; he himself is his destroyer.

In this complex machinery of man there is an invisible powerful force called mind, which, like electricity, may serve as his most bitter foe or greatest friend. Latent in his mind is a rubbish-heap of evil and a store-house of virtue. In this rubbish-heap are found three impurities that defile and ruin him. One is Lobha – that is, lust, greed, or attachment which tends to create. The second is Dosa –

that is, anger, hatred, ill will or aversion which tends to destroy. The third is Moha – that is, ignorance or stupidity which tends to create and destroy.

The Buddha describes lust as an unparalleled fire, hatred as an unparalleled crime, and ignorance as an unparalleled net.

These three roots of evil, latent in us all, in varying degrees are solely responsible for all the ills of life prevalent in this world.

Until and unless these three universal evil roots are either eradicated or attenuated and their opposite virtues – generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom – fully developed, no peace and real happiness can ever be guaranteed.

To change the contemporary situation of the world for the better, a radical change in the condition of the environment – physical, economic, political, social, psychological and religious – is also essential. We must admit that men react to their environment as much as environments react on them.

It is left to the respective Governments of States to understand causes and remedy defects. But religions, especially Buddhism, attend more or less to internal moral development. Governments and public-spirited bodies must provide the suitable environment and other necessary facilities while religions must cater for moral development to make men ideal citizens.

It is gratifying to note that respective Governments and philanthropic societies are attempting to eradicate poverty, disease, and ignorance that prevail amongst the masses which comprise the majority of mankind. These three conditions exist more so in Asia and Africa than in materially advanced Europe or America.

With regard to education which tends to eliminate ignorance, the root cause of most ills in the world, a word should be said. In their impressionable youth children should be taught how to think more than what to think. Freedom of thought is essential in modern education. It should have a religious foundation so that the educated youths may be trained both morally and intellectually.

All people in the world not only wish to have freedom of thought and right of speech but also freedom from all compulsory subjugation which unfortunately still prevails in this civilized world. It is the animal instinct of man that prompts the powerful nations to “bluff, bully, swindle” and plunder the weaker nations.

The world is so constituted that the majority of mankind, the Buddha remarks, are ill-disciplined. As people are living in such a world, at times they may be compelled to adopt a middle way according to circumstances.

Our ancient books give a beautiful illustrative story. A snake was reared by an ascetic and was taught to practise loving kindness to all. One day while it was lying in a forest a woman, mistaking it for a rope, took it and tied it around her bundle of sticks, which she had collected. On returning home she untied the bundle. When the snake returned to the cell the ascetic questioned it as to its delay.

“Good Master, when I was meditating on loving kindness in the forest a woman who had come to collect sticks, mistaking me for a rope, took me and used me to tie her bundle. I was just released. Pardon me for the delay.”

“Well, good snake, you have done well in radiating your loving-kindness to such an extent. Just to show that you were a snake you should have at least raised your hood and hissed a little,” said the ascetic.

In the same way as we are living in a world with people of diverse temperaments, at times using our wise discrimination, we may be compelled to hiss a little.

In this chaotic world this is the most opportune moment to look within and produce the latent virtues which largely contribute to our genuine peace and happiness and which cannot be obtained by the mere enjoyment of illusory sensual pleasures.

There lies within us all an excellent virtue which, when developed, will give us and others a transcendental happiness. It is Buddhist Metta or Maitri which may be rendered by benevolence, loving-kindness, friendliness or goodwill. It is defined as the sincere wish for the success, happiness and prosperity of all beings, all nations, all races without exception. It is not limited to “our neighbours” alone or only to human beings. It is to be extended to helpless animals as well.

“As a mother protects her only child,” says the Buddha, “even at the risk of her own life, even so should you extend your boundless loving-kindness towards all.”

Commenting on the magnetic power of this sweet virtue the Buddha states: “Dwelling on the mountain slopes I drew to me lions and tigers by the power of loving-kindness. Surrounded by lions and tigers, by panthers and buffaloes, by antelopes, stags and bears, I dwelt in the forest. No creature was terrified of me, and neither was I afraid of any creature. The power of my loving-kindness was my support, thus I dwelt upon the mountain side.”

The present situation of this restless world is such that it is badly in need of this boundless loving-kindness which knows no barrier whatever. If all nations and all races practise this Metta, enemies and foreigners there will not be, since universal love, realized through understanding, establishes the brotherhood of all living beings.

Allied to loving-kindness is another blessed virtue that elevates us to the state of a superman, a god, a Brahma. It is Karuna or compassion that makes the tender hearts of the noble quiver at the sufferings of others. The compassion of a great man consists in realizing the quality of oneself with others and also the substitution of others for oneself. When he so regards this fact, his egoism fades and he makes no difference between himself and others. He returns good for evil and his compassion is as unfailing as the mother earth that suffers in silence all that may be done to her.

What both East and West can do today is to combine the spiritual wisdom of the East with the scientific knowledge of the West to evolve a golden era when all peoples, irrespective of caste, creed, colour or race, can live in perfect harmony like ideal citizens of one world.