

# A Buddhist Humanism for the ‘Asian Century’

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## Abstract

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*The growing interest in critiquing the Buddhist metaphysic points to the remarkable congruence between the intellectual and moral discourse of the Western and Buddhist Enlightenment traditions. In this regard, this Paper argues that the Buddhist discourse is ideally suited to confront the challenge presented by the scourge of anti-intellectualism and moral decay of a contemporary world which is overcome by an unbridled material progress steeped in a sterile individualism, selfishness, and greed. The Paper concludes by suggesting that a Buddhist Humanism extolling the power of reason and ‘other regarding’ sentiments may generate the intellectual and moral foundations of a cultural renaissance befitting the emerging knowledge based ethos of the ‘Asian Century.’*

Key words: Buddhism, Philosophy, Humanism, Enlightenment,  
Asian Century.

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## I. Introduction

The continued growth of interest in the study and practice of Buddhism throughout the Western world, examined by scholars such as Toms (1998), Coleman (2000) and others, is a fascinating phenomenon which warrants scrutiny. Rather than trying to account for this expansion of Buddhism worldwide, this essay is focussed on considering the contemporary relevance and significance of the Buddhist intellectual discourse for a new world ethos, in what has been termed the 'Asian Century.'<sup>1</sup> To this end, we consider how Buddhism has the capacity to respond to two dominant and distinctive but disturbing features of modern society—be it the First, Second, or the Third World. I refer here first and foremost to the rampant and growing anti-intellectualism closely associated with religious fundamentalism; and secondly, to the culture of selfishness and greed that dominates post-industrial capitalism, born out of an excessive and uninhibited ideology of individualism.

Given that knowledge and understanding are distinctive features of the Buddhist canon as found in Early Buddhism<sup>2</sup> 'anti-intellectualism' is anathema to the Buddhist metaphysic which sits easily in the Western Academy built on the foundations of the Enlightenment. The logic and rationale of the Buddhist discourse which extols a rational empiricism is congenial to the western intellectual tradition built on the values and ideas of the Renaissance, such as freedom, democracy, intellectual autonomy, and the primacy of reason. These normative ideas constitute the core values that underpin the Enlightenment project in Europe that emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries which were 'at once rationalist and empiricist' (Todorov 2009, 4).

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1 The term 'Asian Century' is used to denote the belief that Asian (mainly Indian and Chinese) politics, economics, and culture will dominate the 21st century in much the same way as Britain and the United States of America prevailed in the 19th and 20th respectively.

2 The Buddhist canon as found in Early Buddhism and evident in the Theravada Tradition is contained in Three Baskets or Pitakas—the Vinaya (Discipline), the Abhidhamma (Metaphysic), and the Sutta (Discourses). Of these the Sutta Pitaka or the Collection of Texts or Discourses consists of Four Volumes known as the Four Nikāyas (Digha, Majjhima, Samyutta, and Anguttara, and a fifth collection called the Khuddaka consisting of fifteen short texts. See RhysDavids (1975) for a concise overview of this Literature; also Nyanatiloka (1969).

Not surprisingly it was in this intellectual environment of the Age of Enlightenment that the early interest in the study of Buddhism was nurtured among western scholars,<sup>3</sup> the Orientalists, such as Max Muller, Oldenburgh, Hodgson, Burnoff, RhysDavids and others. Concurrently this interest in Buddhist scholarship in the West, happened to coincide with the controversy between science and religion in the West and subsequently this became a critical issue in disentangling the contested relation between religion and philosophy among western philosophers (Gray 2008). This, among other considerations, led to a growing awareness of the communality between the basic ideas and values of the Enlightenment and the logic of the Buddhist metaphysic such as an emphasis on reason, individual autonomy, universality and the human end purposes of our actions (Todorov 2009). Indeed, Kant's watchword to characterise the Enlightenment as *Sapere Aude* "Have courage to use your own reason" (quoted in Law 2011) sits comfortably with the Buddhist Enlightenment.

There is now a wide consensus of scholarly opinion that the remarkable congruence of the idea systems in these two intellectual traditions is central to any informed understanding of the Buddhist metaphysic. The values and ideas of these two otherwise divergent intellectual traditions, among other considerations, underline the humanistic world view they share in common. Humanism refers in the broadest sense to a system of thought framed in terms of human values, interests, and dignity. Above all, humanism exhibits characteristics such as the primacy of reason, atheism, or agnosticism, a stress on moral values, moral autonomy and secularism (Law 2011). A Buddhist humanism exemplifies these characteristics and, as we shall argue, is well equipped to confront the scourge of anti-intellectualism as well as the deepening moral vacuum in the emerging knowledge based world ethos of the 'Asian Century.'

At the same time we shall also argue that the Buddhist ethical and moral order which underpins a Buddhist humanism emphatically rejects the culture of selfishness and greed, arising from unbridled material progress and a

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3 Goldberg (2006) provides a useful general discussion of Buddhism in the West while Coleman (2001) offers a similar but more sociological interpretation; also see Prebish (1999).

crass individualism that is likely to dominate the new 'Empires' of the Asian century as was characteristic of the earlier Age of Empires—British and American—associated with the rise of industrial capitalism. In this regard we shall endeavour to refute the point of view advanced by Toynbee (1986) and others that cultural ethos of a Buddhist Enlightenment is likely to be enveloped in an individualist creed on the grounds that Buddhism espouses a selfish or ego-centric view of the individual. This point of view in assuming that Buddhism 'is merely a salvation religion that is disengaged from social concerns' (Premasiri 2006) fails to acknowledge that all the main Traditions of Buddhism<sup>4</sup>—Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana—not only share 'a solid common core' (Gethin 1998) but also have a deep and abiding interest in promoting both individual well-being and collective human welfare. This more comprehensive understanding of the Buddhist has led to the recent emergence of what has come to be known as 'Engaged Buddhism.'<sup>5</sup> What is distinctive of this approach is that it specifically acknowledges the social dimensions of Buddhist discourse, practical as well as metaphysical. By highlighting this distinctive aspect of the Buddhist discourse the Buddhist Enlightenment strikes at the root of the perverse forms of selfishness, associated with contemporary individualist philosophy of the neo-liberal economic paradigm.

## **II. Framing Buddhist Enlightenment Values for the Information Age**

The spread of anti-intellectualism in all societies, but more so in the West, reflects a sense of disenchantment and intellectual despair arising from an inability to comprehend the knowledge explosion in a variety of fields of knowledge. The flight away from the rationalist and empiricist rationale of Enlightenment values has led many to abandon the secular humanism based on a scientific view of the world that evolved from the days of the Renaissance and which included an emphatic rejection of the pervasive influence of

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4 See Guruge (2004) for an account of the different Traditions and the main philosophical schools—*Vaibhasika*, *Sautrantika*, *Madhyamaka* and *Yogacara*—associated with these Traditions; also Harvey (1990).

5 Eppsteiner (1988) and Macy (1984) provide a good overview of Buddhist social practices known as 'Engaged Buddhism'; see also Rahula (1988) and Jayatilleke (1988) on Buddhist social philosophy.

ecclesiastical authority in all walks of life. An early example of this anti-intellectualism may be found in esoteric forms of theosophy and particularly in offshoots such as the writings of Krishnamurti, Gurdjieff, and Ouspensky that were evident during the early part of the 20th century. In a perceptive review of several recent studies analysing the growth of theosophy in Western societies it is suggested that:

There can be no escaping the fact that in our nominally empirical technology driven age, the creativity and initiative of many significant achievers has been bound together with transparently absurd beliefs and practices. (Crews 1996)

Perhaps the most visible and damning manifestations of anti-intellectualism is seen in the emergence of fundamentalism across all faiths.<sup>6</sup> As a result we find a growing incidence of numerous sects and cults steeped in the mystique of gurus, of magical beliefs, practices and rituals (e.g., Waco in Texas, The Solar Temple cult in France, Om Supreme Truth sect in Japan, and many others). It was this search for intellectual solace and emotional security that was reflected in various forms of counter culture in western societies such as occultism and gnosticism. Whereas occultism refers to a belief system that regards nature as possessing secret properties contradicting the laws of science; gnosticism points to the intuitive apprehension of deep truths without the need for corroborating evidence.

These instances of anti-intellectualism are not merely confined to countries in the West such as the United States of America, the United Kingdom or Australia, but represent a world-wide phenomenon. There is no doubt that anti-scientific movements such as 'creationism' have blatantly encouraged a supernaturalism, committing one to surrender one's rationality and critical judgement to forms of gnostic knowledge. Unfortunately these movements become matters of public interest and concern only when they end, as they often do, in tragic consequences such as cult suicides or wanton and senseless destruction of human life as in the case of the Japanese sect

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<sup>6</sup> See Gallop (2006) for a succinct discussion of fundamentalism in contemporary society; see also Almond et al. (2003) for a useful overview.

mentioned above.

However, this anti-intellectualism is, perhaps nowhere better evident than in the growing literature critiquing about the value of science as against other forms of knowledge. As Dixon rightly observes, for 'Christian fundamentalists' the spread of Darwinism was both a cause and a symptom of the degradation of human civilization' (Dixon 2008, 86). This religious opposition to Darwinism is often associated with different forms of creationism, i.e., that the humans and life on earth were created supernaturally by God. More recently, these controversies are largely associated with the work of the eminent mathematician and physicist Stephen Hawking (1998) who has rekindled the longstanding 'cold war' between science and religion in western intellectual circles.<sup>7</sup> This is well reflected in what has been pejoratively labelled 'New Atheists' who are distinguished from the 'Old Atheists' (e.g., Herbert Spencer, Thomas Huxley, etc.) only by the intellectual climate when they existed i.e., the 19th and 20th as against the 21st century (Stenger 2010).

Briefly, it is Stephen Hawking's claim that the hidden mysteries of the universe—its origin and destiny—may well be unlocked and laid bare by the new science of cosmology as it ventures into the origins of space and time. It is this forthright statement which has angered writers such as Appleyard (1992), who belong to a growing anti-science movement, including creationism, which is often linked with a revival of fundamentalist religious sects. Bewildered by the intellectual achievements of modern man, and the inescapable influence of a highly rational and technological world, these critics reject what they call the arrogance of science in claiming to understand the unfathomable and unknowable and provide us with absolute certainties.

What has alarmed many traditionalists is the claim that developments in scientific and technical knowledge such as in the new science of cosmology may provide answers to some of the ultimate and fundamental questions about the nature of life and the universe. Despite this expanding new scientific knowledge<sup>8</sup> several mainstream religions, claim that they are able to provide

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<sup>7</sup> A good recent introduction to the relationship between science and religion will be found in Dixon (2008); and Harrison (2010); see also Gould (1994).

<sup>8</sup> See Harrison (2000) for an informed overview of recent developments in the science of cosmology.

an alternative and defensible theological explanation of questions about the origins of the universe and man's destiny. Consequently the overwhelming dominant influence of science and technology in the emerging knowledge based society and economy, has created for many influential groups in contemporary society an environment over which they are seemingly powerless and appears utterly perplexed.

It is this sense of utter despair and frustration about the hegemonic influence of science on nearly every aspect of our daily life that has led to what has been aptly termed by Merson (1995) as the 'ignorance movement' which states that:

When things get tough, chaotic or confused, people tend to fall back on traditional certainties or this often results in religious fundamentalism...[which though] reassuring and emotionally satisfying are often inappropriate for the times we are living in. (Merson 1995, 65)

Nevertheless the solution offered by Merson to this apparent conflict between science and religion is itself unsatisfactory. Clearly, his proposition that there is 'a fundamental difference between scientific and religious knowledge'—while it may be true of many other religious systems—does not apply to Buddhism.

On the contrary, Buddhism stands unique among the mainstream religions of the world in that it sees no such qualitative difference between scientific and religious world view. Indeed, as H. G. Wells (1921) observed many decades ago in the heyday of nineteenth century rationalism—and since confirmed by numerous others—the fundamental tenets of Buddhist thought are 'in the closest harmony with modern idea systems.' McMahan commenting on the recent discussions of the relationship between Buddhism and Science suggests that the scholarly interest in this issue in the West is largely an outcome of 'two intertwining crises...the *Victorian crisis of faith and crisis of colonialism and western hegemony in Asia*' (McMahan 2004, 925).

Without entering into the complexities of the highly contested argument about 'the compatibility of Buddhism and modern science' (McMahan 2004,

898), we shall argue that what is perhaps most distinctive of the Buddhist way of thinking and its attraction for those schooled in western thought is its rational empiricism. Thus, the key concepts of Buddhism are not presented as *a priori* truths, obligatory beliefs or the products of a speculative metaphysic. They are all founded on verifiable experience based on diligent mental effort, right understanding and right wisdom. The truth of its assertions depends on its own compelling power, congruence with facts of observation and not on the coercive authority of religious orthodoxy, transcendental doctrines or intuitive truths (Jayatilke 1963). Accordingly as in scientific rationalism, originating from the Age of Enlightenment, the Buddhist discourse too assumes that empirical truths are based on verifiable knowledge grounded on empirical observation and reason.

As in the scientific paradigm in Buddhism too, one is enjoined in the *Kālāma Sutta*<sup>9</sup>:

Not to be misled by reports, tradition or hearsay; [or] be misled by proficiency in the Collections, nor by mere logic and inference; nor after considering reasons, nor after reflection on some view and approval of it, nor because it fits becoming, nor because the recluse is your teacher. But when you know for yourselves, these things are not good, these things are faulty, these things are censured by the intelligent, these things when performed and undertaken conduce to loss and sorrow, and then do you reject them.

The advice given here attests to the greatest freedom of thought and an attitude of critical inquiry which indeed favours dissent as a means of the discovery of a true and verifiable knowledge about man and the nature of his existence. Buddhism, in its emphasis on knowledge and understanding as a basis of correct action, places great value on the power of man's ability to reason and comprehend the truth and seek salvation without recourse to a life of prayer and sacrifice shrouded in dogma, absolutism and faith. This is vividly expressed in the Buddha's exhortation<sup>10</sup>:

<sup>9</sup> Soma Thera (1963) and Bhikku Bodhi (1988) provide a useful exposition of this Discourse which is found in the *Anguttara Nikaya*. See also Evans (2007).

<sup>10</sup> This is taken from the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, a Discourse in the *Dīgha Nikāya*. This Discourse contains some of the most important philosophical expositions given at the time of the death of the

*Be ye lamps unto yourself;  
Be ye a refuge unto yourself;  
Betake yourself to no external refuge.*

At the same time, the morality enshrined in the Buddhist ethic is not only rational and scientific but is distinctly humanistic. Unlike in many authoritarian religions, man stands not against himself but for himself; and it is precisely for this reason that, amongst others, Thouless (1962) has pointed out that the western scientific world view is more Buddhist than Christian. Or, as Erich Fromm, the well-known psychoanalyst and social philosopher expresses it, 'Buddhism is more congenial to western rational thought than western religious beliefs' (Fromm 1955).

There are two key features of this similarity between Buddhism and western scientific thought, which warrant mention. First, the Buddhist view of knowledge, which is, above all highly empirical in that the source of all knowledge lies in one's experience and the activity of the mind that is in its cognitive distillation. Secondly, the pursuit of knowledge as in contemporary science also underlines an analytical causal mode of thinking. Thus, for example the Buddhist Texts maintain that the way to engage in inquiries directed at resolving questions of doubt and uncertainty with a view to gain a correct understanding of phenomena is by rational analysis. This mode of intellectual discourse is especially evident in one of the Three Baskets, of the Buddhist canon, the *Abhidhamma Pitaka* (Jayasuriya 1963; Harvey 1990). In this exposition of the Buddhist metaphysics which was held with 'great veneration...in Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhism [one finds] the most refined and developed standards of analytical sharpness, logical consistency and definitional clarity' (Premasiri 2007). The role of reason and empirical scrutiny is perhaps best expressed in the *Culahatthipadopama Sutta* in the *Majjhima Nikaya* (Bhikku Nanamoli and Bhikku Bodhi 1995). Premasiri argues that this Discourse details a method of arriving at verifiable conclusions very similar to the mode of reasoning associated with the hypothetico-deductive of verification in contemporary science (Premasiri 2007).

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Buddha. See Ling (1981) for a recent translation of this Text.

Furthermore, as in scientific theorising, a central feature of the Buddha's enlightenment is the Buddhist theory of causation dependent arising which by invoking the notion of conditionality avoids the pitfalls of a linear mechanistic mode of analysis. Stated differently causation, as 'dependent origination,' in the Buddhist discourse states that events of whatever kind—material, psychological or moral—are not haphazard in their occurrence, not chancy or fortuitous but follow *a pattern of regular sequence* (Bhikku Bodhi 1983). In other words, all events are determinate, regular and lawful. But, unlike the dominant linear cause-effect viewpoint of western science, especially of Newtonian physics, the Buddhist version, refers more to a plurality of interacting antecedent events and consequent conditions, operating more like a causal web or causal chain. Thus, cause and effect are never fixed. What is an effect now may be a cause of some other event and so on. These features of the Buddhist view of causation<sup>11</sup> interestingly makes it more consistent with the new philosophy of science which rejects conclusively the rigid, linear reductionist views of early mechanistic scientific methodology characteristic of orthodox positivism.

However, we need to identify clearly that the Buddhist view of causality as a non-linear view of causation is conceptually not committed to a rigid determinism or to a theory of single causation. In Buddhist theorising, the sequence of causation may be interfered with through human action; the acts of human choice which themselves are determined, i.e., these choices are subject to conditionality or dependent arising. Accordingly, some acts may be 'indeterminate' in so far as the outcomes of any act can be interrupted or changed by intervening circumstance. This points, in particular, to the important role played by 'right effort' in overcoming present unsatisfactory conditions in man's endeavours towards realisation of his true nature, i.e., right understanding through right knowledge. Hence, the mind, according to Buddhism, through its acts of volition, can alter the operation of causal processes.

Bearing in mind this distinctive account of the nature of causality the

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<sup>11</sup> Kalupahana (1975) provides a succinct account and useful discussion of the Buddhist view of causality.

Buddhist exposition of causality avoids the two extremes of a rigid and/or a total *determinism*. Accordingly the:

Buddhist theory of causation seems to accept an element of indeterminacy in nature, which in the case of human actions manifests itself as the free will of the individual, which is conditioned but not totally determined by the factors that affect it. (Jayatilleke 1961)

There is, in short, no way of understanding the essence of Buddhist teaching, the Dhamma, without comprehending the Buddhist theory of causation. This is neatly and succinctly expressed in one simple sentence, summarising the essence of Buddhist teaching or the 'Dhamma': '*He who sees dependent arising sees the Dhamma; he who sees the Dhamma sees dependent arising*' (Bhikkhu Bodhi 1983). Stated differently, this is the view that everything has a cause and that by understanding the cause one could manipulate the effect. After all, this proposition is the central axiom of scientific theorising underlying scientific advances over the last few centuries.

For this reason, Buddhist theorising about moral and social issues is based on four basic propositions, the *Four Noble Truths* which<sup>12</sup> contain the crux of the causal analytical model, distinctive of the Buddhist teaching. The *First Truth*, the starting point of the teaching, asserts that all conditional states of existence are painful or unsatisfactory in that these states are illusory and insubstantial. According to the Buddhist teachings this is an empirical fact, an objective observation which describes the human condition. As the Buddha states, 'one thing only do I teach: sorrow and its end to reach.' The *Second Noble Truth* which points to the cause of unsatisfactoriness, that is, sorrow or painfulness, asserts that this 'sorrow,' arises from selfish craving for the gratification of one's passions, ambitions and deep-seated self-linked attachments. These are identified as greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*). Craving, or striving for self-linked objects, is in other words the motivational force which sustains suffering viewed as the eternal condition of

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12 A detailed canonical account of the Four Noble Truths is given by Nanamoli and Bodhi (1995) in a recent translation of the *Majjhima Nikaya*.

man, the angst of man.

The *Third Noble Truth* states that there is an end to suffering or the cessation of human attachment or craving, and the *Fourth Noble Truth* points to the Buddhist Way by which this craving can be destroyed so that potentially painful situations have no longer the power to harm us. This Buddhist Way or the Buddhist Path is presented as a Path of Eight Steps (the *Noble Eightfold Path*) which describes the Buddhist code of practice by which one may seek one's salvation or liberation from continued pain and suffering through aeons of time.

This account of moral perfection, that is, of salvation or liberation, is strictly in accord with the causal model of scientific analysis in that it relies on inductive reasoning based on observation to make inferences that are verifiable. Stated differently the Four Noble Truths portray how the Buddha like a physician or surgeon seeks to cure/heal the injuries caused by the existential plight of human suffering. Thus, for instance, this mode of reasoning as in the modern germ theory of disease, maintains that disease, like *dukkha*, is painful.

Whereas the cause of disease in modern science lies in bacteria or germs, the cause of sorrow on the Buddhist metaphysic is craving or self-linked desire; and finally, the achievement of 'positive health or state of 'well-being' is by the destruction of craving. This constitutes the basis for the release from one's state of servitude in pain and sorrow. This destruction of craving is analogous to overcoming an unwholesome state of ill health in the medical model. In Buddhism the remedial medicine is, of course, to be found in the *Noble Eightfold Path*—a mode of conduct—a way of life, which will eventually rid one of pain and sorrow.

Daniels (1988) in defence of this rational empirical model of analysis, cites the Buddhist response to environmental issues as providing a neat illustration of how these types of conditions confronting modern society are handled in Buddhist theorising. For Buddhists, the solution to such social problems in general has to occur through a change in the self or one's self-centric disposition in a manner that:

The rationality of Buddhism offers both an explanation and cure for the ills confronting humankind. (Daniels 1988, 151)

For Daniels this rationality rests solidly on the analytic mode of reasoning of the *Four Noble Truths* and the behavioral implications of the social and moral principle evident in the injunctions to 'right conduct' and 'right action.' These pertain to actions such as frugality and moderation in material consumption, and the ability to see beyond one's narrow self-interest. What this also brings to the fore is the undeniable fact that Buddhism has always been a potent spiritual force in the pursuit of human welfare. In short, we come to recognize an oft neglected aspect of Buddhist philosophy, namely, its social dimension (Chakravarthy 1996).

### **III. 'This Worldly Buddhism' for the 'Asian Century'**

The social dimensions of Buddhism have recently been highlighted in the path finding research study of Kancha Ilaih (2000)<sup>13</sup> who according to Omvedt (2001), makes the pointed observation that the Buddha, far from being a 'religious' thinker, was pre-eminently a social thinker. This tradition of social thinking clearly revealed in the social ethic inherent in Buddhism is perhaps most visible in the historic edicts of Emperor Asoka (Thurman 1988) and is best understood as presenting a 'civilizational view' (Ling 1973) of Buddhism. More recently this historical tradition of Buddhism has been reaffirmed in the tradition of contemporary Buddhism known as '*Engaged Buddhism*,' a descriptive coined in 1963, originates by the well-known Vietnamese Buddhist Teacher in the West, Thich Nhat Hanh, who has along with others such as Sulak Sivaraksa, A. T. Ariyaratne, and Master Chen Yen framed the principles and practices of 'Engaged Buddhism.'<sup>14</sup> This Buddhist tradition is best revealed in the form of Buddhist practice advocated by Sulak

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13 Kancha Illaih belongs to a new breed of Dalit scholars who, following Dr. Ambedkar have sought to present the Buddha as a social and political thinker who predates Socrates, Plato and Aristotle (Ilaih 2000, 2).

14 For an account of 'Engaged Buddhism' in Asian countries see Queen and King (1996); and for a similar account in the West, see Kulananda (1997).

Sivaraksa in Thailand, A. T. Ariyaratne in Sri Lanka, and Master Chen Yen in Taiwan, seeks to apply the values and teachings of Buddhism to the problems of society in a non violent way, motivated by concern for the welfare of others, and as an expression of one's own practice of the Buddhist Way (King and Queen 2005, 5).

The logic and rationale of 'Engaged Buddhism' stands in sharp contrast to those theorists who from a standpoint of a limited anthropological discourse, rejects a 'world-affirming' view of Buddhism. This understanding of Buddhism in some sections of the Western Academy, goes back to Max Weber's interpretation of Buddhism as a 'world denying' religion. Accordingly these scholars tend to regard 'Engaged Buddhism'<sup>15</sup> as a late twentieth century development uniquely framed by the cross fertilization between Buddhism and the discourses of modernity (McMahan 2008, 250). In other words, Engaged Buddhism was viewed as a way of accommodating Buddhism to the dominant Judeo-Christian ethic. In other words, this perspective on Buddhism was viewed as a response to modernism.

This is highly reminiscent of what theorists who characterise the practice of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, or 'Sinhala Buddhism,' as 'Protestant Buddhism' (Gombrich and Obeysekera 1988). Hence the 19th century Buddhist revival in Sri Lanka led by Anagarika Dhammapala and others was seen as a classic instance of the manifestation of Protestant Buddhism. This viewpoint, as Bond (1992) rightly points out, misinterprets 'Sinhala Buddhism' as a response to modernism by assuming that Early Buddhism was primarily a religion of individual salvation focussed on the striving of ascetic monks.

Likewise the view that Buddhism is philosophically incapable of expounding a 'social ethic' has also been disputed sharply by Holt (1990) and others on philosophical/doctrinal and empirical grounds. Without entering into the philosophical niceties of this somewhat radical interpretation, it will suffice to see how Western Buddhists particularly in expositions of Engaged Buddhism, have, more so than the traditional adherents of Buddhism (e.g., in

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15 See King (2005) for a succinct account of the principles and practices of Engaged Buddhism. The ethical issues of social activism in Engaged Buddhism are explored by Gnanarama (1996), Eppsteiner (1978), and Harvey (2000).

countries like Sri Lanka, Thailand or Burma) understood Buddhism as a moral philosophy based on wisdom, love, and compassion capable of dealing with questions of social morality and ethics in an age of selfishness.

This mode of thinking obviously suggests a shift from the Self to 'other-regarding sentiments,' and serves to challenge the question of the alleged selfishness in Buddhism, that Buddhism presents an inward looking world view. As noted previously, this was also the mistaken view of some early Western scholars such as Toynbee (1986) who criticised the exposition of Buddhism found in *Early Buddhism* as presenting a highly individualistic philosophy concerned predominantly, if not exclusively, with personal salvation even at the expense of others.<sup>16</sup> This was again presented as a response to modernism by accommodating Buddhism to the dominant Judeo-Christian ethic.

Other scholars however, suggest that this 'other worldly' interpretation of Buddhism applies only to the Theravada tradition based on Early Buddhism which unlike the Mahayana tradition is more contemplation orientated than devoted to social action. This interpretation of *Early Buddhism* is nevertheless firmly rejected by Kalupahana (1995) who argues that in the Theravada Tradition.

The individual is neither a totally independent entity with absolute inalienable rights nor one that is totally determined by the society with no claims to right...society is neither a mere conglomeration of individuals without any relations nor an absolute reality imposing its authority on the individual without restrictions. (Kalupahana 1995, 58)

But Kraft (2005) observes that the principles and even some of the techniques of an Engaged Buddhism were evident in all traditions of Buddhism. While there may be differences of emphasis in the practice of Buddhism between the main traditions of Buddhism (e.g., East Asian, South Asian, and Tibetan), there is, however, a common heritage in the shared foundations of the Buddhist ethic among the several Schools of Buddhism (Jayatilleke 1967; Harvey 2000; Gethin 2000).

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<sup>16</sup> This misinterpretation was also echoed by John Paul II (pope) when he described the Buddhist Enlightenment as 'a state of perfect indifference to the world' (John Paul II 1994).

Stated briefly, Buddhism is basically committed to what in western social theory is called 'methodological individualism,' namely, that all explanations must ultimately be in terms of individual aims and beliefs. While asserting the centrality of the individual in affirming, one's freedom and autonomy, Buddhism at the same time is quick to recognise the complex and interdependent relationship that exists between the individual and society or the 'Self' and the 'Other.' This is indeed a highly complex relationship not easy to comprehend without delving into the deeper questions of individual identity which are interwoven with an understanding of the Buddhist concept of the Self.

Without embarking on a detailed exposition of the Buddhist theory of the Self, or the *Anatta* doctrine, it will suffice to note that what is denied is a permanent immutable self but not the existential reality of a perceived self, that is, of a sense of individuality in the operation of 'self-interest' in everyday experience.<sup>17</sup> Unlike modern psychology, especially humanistic psychology,<sup>18</sup> Buddhism does not commit the error of reifying the self, i.e., regarding the self as agent. It is this conceptualisation of the self as an active agent in some systems of thought which emphasises personal growth and self-actualisation. However, there are other formulations of 'humanistic psychology' where the self is not perceived as 'a substantive concept, a thing-like-substance' (Smith 1974, 181) acting as an agent in self-understanding. The self in this sense is not 'a ghost in the machine' or seen as a reified self but is concerned with dispositions such as wishes, intentions and feelings.

This is exactly how the self-interest functions in Buddhist psychology i.e., through conscious bodily acts, motives and volitions (*citta* and *cetasikas*). In this context, Jayatilleke (1961) has, perhaps given the definitive Buddhist answer to the damaging charge that Buddhist individualism amounts to selfishness and an indifference to human welfare or the improbability of society by pointing out that this dilemma of the self or the other (egoism vs. altruism) is not simply an either/or question. The *either/or* fallacy inherent in this point of view is decried by Jayatilleke who rightly observes that there is

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17 See Nyanaponika (1974) for a useful discussion of the concept of the Self, the *Anatta* doctrine.

18 See Smith (1974) and M. & L. Wallach (1983) for critical overview of humanistic psychology.

ample evidence in the Buddhist teaching to demonstrate that the life of a Buddhist—be he a layman or an ascetic—has to be lived partly in both a *social* and *personal* dimension.

The Buddhist desires happiness in this world and the next, and the moral path to this happiness is founded partly on the notion of the perfectibility of the individual and also on the notion of social concern. This follows from the basic character of the Moral Path—starting from the cultivation of virtue (*sila*) through the practice of concentration (*samādhi*) and understanding the truth of existence (*paññā*) and finally the attainment of freedom and peace and harmony (*nibbāna*)—is that this Path concerns the individual not in isolation but in association with others. Besides, these aspects of the Path are not linear but operate ‘in a reciprocal relationship, mutually dependant’ (Gethin 1998).

Furthermore the practice of the Path is not concerned with oneself (e.g., refraining from deeds harmful to one) but also oriented to others. This is mainly because the practice of the Path could be expressed as a movement through generosity (*dāna*), good conduct (*sila*), to meditation/concentration (*bhavana*) is not exclusively concerned with oneself but oriented in relation to others. For example, in the practice of good conduct (*sila*) one begins with the wish for one’s well-being along with that of others; that is loving kindness (*metta*) which is then extended through compassion (*karuṇa*) to others. It is above all compassion which opens oneself to others, a sense of ‘humanity.’ Thus, when one engages in mindfulness (*bhavana*), there is a clear assumption that ‘we notice another person suffers’ (Thich Naht Hanh quoted in Toms 1998).

Admittedly at first sight the practice of this moral Path is depicted more from the perspective of the laity but it should be noted that the ascetics too did not live idly in isolation. The stories of the monks and nuns during the days of the Buddha as recorded in the *Thera and Theri-Gāthās*<sup>19</sup> clearly indicates the social character of the moral Path. In other words, there is no conflict in pursuing both the reform of society and the salvation of the

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19 See Oldenburgh and Pischel (1966).

individual. This interdependence is clearly acknowledged in the Buddhist texts which state that no one can help or save another unless he has 'saved himself,' i.e., is free from mental burdens and stresses; and therefore, as expressed in the Buddhist canon:

It is not possible for one who is stuck in the mud to help out another but is possible for one who is not stuck in the mud to help another who is stuck in the mud. It is not possible that a man who has not saved himself to save another. (*Sallekha Sutta*)<sup>20</sup>

This is further explained in the Buddhist moral characterology of Four Types of personalities—the *amoralist*, *altruist*, *egoist* and *enlightened egoist*—and identified as one who cares for:

- a) neither his own welfare nor the welfare of others (*amoralist*);
- b) the welfare of others but not his own (*altruist*);
- c) his own welfare but not of others (*egoist*); and,
- d) the welfare of both himself as well as others (*enlightened egoist*).

According to this valuation, the highest and best person is the personality type, the '*enlightened egoist*,' i.e., the one who works for his own good as well as the good of others. In such persons, there is no necessary conflict between the individual and social welfare, particularly when the good happens to be moral and spiritual.

There is no doubt, that the social philosophy of Buddhist and other Indian religions places its 'primary emphasis on the individual and...social consequences follow from the centre of the individual's own psychology' (Wijesekera 1960, 494). It is for this reason that, 'the Buddha':

While acknowledging social and environmental factors, always emphasised the subjective aspects of his social ethic; and as an illustration, he adds that 'peace in the general social sense is only the end result of the cultivation of peace mindedness by the

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<sup>20</sup> See Bhikku Nanamoli and Bhikku Bodhi (1995) for a translation of Discourse in the *Majjhima Nikaya* 1:8.

individual who is the ultimate unit of the social community.’  
(Wijesekera 1960, 495)

Clearly, ‘Buddhism is concerned with the reformation of society as well as the salvation of the individual’ (Slater 1950). Likewise social theorists such as Erich Fromm (1955) have argued strongly that Buddhism is profoundly concerned with individual as well as social well-being. In fact in this regard Buddhism has much in common with Sartre’s existentialism (Sartre 1973) as well as recent expositions of a humanistic psychology (Smith 1974).

For this reason, Buddhism is sometimes regarded as a form of psychotherapy which seeks to change the inner conditions of man and emancipate the individual from the conditions of his material existence and suffering, sense of melancholy as well as dread and anxiety. But, unlike the existential theorists, the choices for the Buddhist are governed by the fundamental facts of conditionality. Hence, the inherently ethical nature of choice in Buddhism is distinct from a romantic hedonism or an abstract intellectualism which is sometimes evident in western humanistic psychology.

In brief, Buddhist psychology seeks relief from stress through coping mechanisms which constitute an integrated form of conduct and moral action based on virtue (*sila*), concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*panna*). The Buddhist prescriptions for living pertain to individual as well as social conduct and these are well documented in Buddhist texts such as the ‘Discourse on the Admonition to Sigala’ (*Sigālovāda Sutta*)<sup>21</sup> which covers a broad spectrum of social relations governing relations between different categories of persons, e.g., parents and children, teachers and pupils, marital relations of husband and wife, friendships relations and the laity and clergy (Ling 1981). All of these recognise mutual responsibilities—e.g., parents and children, and above all recognises that the pursuit of individual happiness and welfare is inextricably linked with the welfare of others.

The concept of welfare is also fully explained in one of the most important Buddhist texts, the ‘Discourse on Brahma’s Net’ (*Brahmajāla Sutta*)<sup>22</sup> which in one section provides a comprehensive description of the moral

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<sup>21</sup> See Kalupahana (1995) for a fuller discussion. Of this Discourse in the *Digha Nikaya* (Ling 1981).

virtues. Among other things, the practice of the seven virtues (i.e., refraining from taking life, stealing, confusing, malicious and harsh speech, frivolous talk and being detached from vulgar sensibility) by ordinary laymen is seen as embodying the ultimate good which includes the welfare of oneself as well as that of others. In addition, these virtues are governed by the Four mental states or attitudes or states of mind—which refer to: loving kindness or friendliness (*mettā*), compassion (*karunā*), sympathetic joy or altruism (*mudithā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*).

A more concrete example of the social relevance of the Buddhist ethic will also be found in the *Agganna Sutta*<sup>23</sup> which gives an account of the evolution of human society. This Discourse, along with that on the Ideal Monarch (*Cakkavatti Sihanada Sutta*)<sup>24</sup>, extols the Buddhist conception of the economic life of human beings (Abeynayake 1995; Kalupahana 1995). For example, it is observed, that when there is an economic downturn, adverse economic conditions are likely to lead to a lack of opportunities, where poverty becomes rampant, and, those distressed by poverty are found to resort to crimes such as lying and stealing and even commit acts of violence. Interestingly, given that the Ideal Monarch in the *Cakkavatti Sihanada Sutta* is represented as one who envisages a 'just society...where there is equality, economic prosperity and the practice of the god life' (Jayatilleke 1962), the blame for this is not placed on the individual but on a society as a whole.

The economic prescriptions for alleviating poverty are also of interest, in that they point to the need for better economic opportunities such as increased capital and also a more equitable distribution of wealth. Accordingly, it is suggested that cooperation between the government and people is conducive to creating economic and social security. In another discourse (*Kutadanta Sutta*),<sup>25</sup> the Buddha attests that having a meaningful employment is more important

22 See Bhikku Bodhi (1978) for an exposition of the *Brahmajala Sutta* taken from the *Digha Nikaya*; also Ling (1981).

23 See Ling (1981) for a translation of this Discourse. Abeynayake (1995) rejects the view that this Discourse amounts to an account of the origins of the world as a, 'Creation Myth.'

24 See Kalupahana (1995) for a succinct discussion of the *Cakkavatti Sihanada Sutta*; from the *Digha Nikaya* which is found in Ling (1981).

25 See Nyanaponika (1970) for an account of this Discourse in the *Anguttara Nikaya*; and Schumacher (1973) and Mendis (1993) for an extended discussion of Buddhist economics.

than the mere possession of goods and services produced routinely by individuals because the joy of work is more conducive to moral progress. Here, it is also acknowledged that righteous economic conduct also refers to the means of acquiring wealth, e.g., avoidance of acquiring wealth by the sale of arms, killing of animals or other non-virtuous activities as well as the management of wealth (Abeynayake 1995).

Similarly there are other Discourses which place a heavy emphasis on the moral values of frugality, resourcefulness, the control of excessive craving and conspicuous consumption in daily life. It is also important to note that in all these social prescriptions there is a concern for the need for a balanced and moderate approach to living such that economic and material happiness is seen as a means to an end, which is moral progress and spiritual happiness (Mendis 1993).

The manner in which economic or material well-being and moral progress or spiritual well-being go together is neatly expressed in the Buddha's admonitions to his wealthy disciple from the merchant class, Anāthapindika in the *Ananya Sutta* of the *Anguttara Nikaya* (Nyanaponika 1970). In this Discourse the Buddha identifies four kinds of happiness a lay person can enjoy including happiness of oneself of others and also importantly of animals which a lay person can enjoy (Ling 1981). These forms of happiness which includes happiness of oneself and that of others and also importantly of animals, can be gained from:

- a) wealth and income gained righteously (*atthi-sukha*)
- b) spending wealth liberally on family and children, friends and relatives (*bhoga sukha*)
- c) maintaining a life free of debts (*annanaa-sukha*), and,
- d) enjoyment gained from living a blameless good life- one away from wrong doings (*anavajjha-sukha*)

This exposition clearly refutes the charge that Buddhism is a selfish and egoistic doctrine steeped in a sterile individualism divorced from the realities of social life. To put it more bluntly, the morality of Buddhism is both pragmatic and even in some respects utilitarian.

#### **IV. Conclusion: The Quest for a New Renaissance**

In conclusion, from the foregoing it is evident that an informed Buddhist cultural ethos framed in terms of a Buddhist humanism is well equipped to confront the demands of a 'knowledge based' society in a highly technocratic age. In seeking to allay the anxieties attendant upon an increasing anti-intellectualism and a crass individualism the quest is for a new Charter of Values befitting the deepening search for social equality and justice in a highly self-centred knowledge driven *Information Age*. In this regard a Buddhist humanism epitomises the essence of a 'scientific humanism' which as Bertrand Russell (1995), expresses it is, '*the good life is one inspired by love and guided by knowledge.*' The code of ethical conduct arising from the Buddhist view of morality is both pragmatic and utilitarian. In other words, 'good' is that which lead to positive outcomes, or desirable/satisfying effects, by relieving one's sorrows and stresses; 'evil' on the other hand, generates ill effects and prolongs the agony of suffering and stress. The prescriptions for moral conduct are carefully laid out not as laws or injunctions to be obeyed as a matter of duty or obligation, but as rules or principles of conduct which flow from a theory of reality capable of validation and verification.

Given that the key tenets and principles of Buddhism extol the virtues of reason, human freedom and moral responsibility, man in contemporary society, especially in a highly scientific and technological age, can profitably engage in a meaningful dialogue with Buddhist thought and practice to determine its relevance to one's individual and social needs. The crux of a Buddhist social philosophy lies in how one conceptualises the concepts of the individual and society, or the self and the other. Following Kalupahana (1999), this may be through the concepts of 'self-interest' and 'mutual self-interest' [to] provide a conceptual bridge between individual and society or self and other. The basis of an '*Engaged Buddhism*' is firmly entrenched in a social ethic and a morality which integrates individual betterment or perfection with the good of others.

Buddhism ranks unique and pre-eminent as a form of secular humanism which presents a cosmic world view of man's total relationship to the human condition in a manner capable of rational analysis. A Buddhist Humanism presents a spiritual world view which is enriching because it enthrones Man's reason and the capacity to seek answers for oneself. This humanism, above all, is expressed in the aim of the 'perfection of man' rather than the 'perfection of things.' This distinctive core feature of the Buddhist teaching may be the beacon which attracts modern man to the Buddhist way of life. To paraphrase Fromm (1949), Buddhism helps man to find an answer to the question of his existence in a manner which does not contradict the rationality, realism and independence which are man's precious achievements.

Rollo May the eminent humanist psychologist, citing Nietzsche (who predicted that much of the 20th century would be a period of turmoil and questioning with the realisation that 'God is dead'), is reported (quoted in Monitor 1985) as having expressed the hope that, as in the past (e.g., the period of the Renaissance in Europe), the present age of turmoil would be followed by a great period of humanism. These sentiments were echoed in the midst of WWII by none other than Julian Huxley (1941) in the Preface to his classic critique of revealed religion stating that:

We are who are happy enough to live in a free lands should think out the basis on which a socially grounded humanist religion could develop healthily, into something of to evolving life, instead of as a menace to it. (Huxley 1941, viii)

In this context, the teachings of the Buddha expressed as a Buddhist humanism may provide for humanity the intellectual and moral foundations for a new cultural renaissance attuned to the needs of a post-industrial world order in the 'Asian Century' of this new millennium.

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