

# Searching for a new Life Style

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## Appropriate Technology

### for a Just and Sustainable Socio-Economic Order

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In my limited experience, I have come across the search for a more alternative lifestyle from people in affluent countries who seem dissatisfied with the mainstream cultural value system in their societies. At present these people are mainly Western. Some individuals and groups have opted out from the Establishment in order to seek for personal freedom, either through their traditional religious beliefs or through new sects and religions. Their numbers, especially including youth, have increased significantly. Some observers have perceived this as a return to the sacred. However, it may be too premature yet to recognise this phenomena as an emerging consciousness for a just society. Indeed at present, there are only scattered pockets of such groups, seeking an alternative lifestyle, appropriate to the industrial or post-industrial era. For some young Americans, to possess only one car and refrigerator for a single family is already considered a search for an alternative lifestyle! They do not realize that refrigerators in USA consume more energy than those in China.

Most people who have opted out from the main affluent western development models seem to have little concern for a just and sustainable socio-economic order. In USA, one sees such groups as Movement for the New Society (based in Philadelphia), characterised by a Quaker traditional background focussing discussion an alter-

native life-style. In England, one sees the EF Schumacher Foundation and magazines like **Resurgence** and **The Ecologist** which advocate a just and sustainable socio-economic order, through appropriate technology, with a decentralized political theory and real concern for appropriate environmental conditions. Their favourite **gurus** include Copra, Illich and Ariyaratne.

Although the above mentioned groups are small and have not yet achieved much in their search for a just society or for an alternative life-style, the impact of their efforts is fairly significant. Some observers perceive that, in the affluent west at least more and more people appear to have been conscientised and have become aware of a new socio-economic order and a more appropriate atmosphere for the masses. The Green Party in West Germany is an obvious political outcome of this direction.

Furthermore, the alarming fear of global Nuclear holocaust can be seen as a healthy and positive sign for people to move more towards a no-violent approach in solving political conflicts. It has also stimulated groups to lobby governments and demand the decrease of arms expenditures.

Unfortunately, however, most political leaders in affluent western countries have colluded with many religious leaders in the established churches who seek to maintain the **status quo**. While they pay lip service to the peoples' demands, they in fact work for



the benefit of the rich and powerful vested interests. Hence armament industries are still a most important function in USA, the Soviet Union as well as in some western European countries. It has been noted that 87% of armaments are sold to the Third World.

Indeed it is quite evident that the affluent west could perhaps maintain its **status quo**, if it could manipulate and control the political and intellectual leaders of the Third World to implement trickle-down development models, i.e. the poor must catch up with the rich, in order that the few rich people in the Third World will become richer and more powerful at the expense of the masses, and the leaders of the Third World will always have to depend on the First World. This is recognised as the new imperialist mentality.

If you ask most Asian peoples, which life-style they would choose, most would point out the western life-style. Japan of course is perceived as the perfect example of the success story. She imitates the west skilfully, integrating both positive and negative elements in their entirety. Hence Japan has now joined the Richman's Club. Like the west she exports "pollution" to South and Southeast Asia. Cheap labour is utilised relentlessly in those countries, raw materials are purchased and exported to many backward or so-called underdeveloped countries. It is believed that Japan will catch up with the west very soon

in exporting armaments to the world at large.

Despite Japan's exploitative process, especially in South East Asia, leaders of many Asian countries wish to imitate Japan through the so-called 'look East' policy. They do not realize that by so doing, a just and sustainable socio-economic order will not eventuate. In fact, there will be no search for alternative life style for people in this region. They will only end up with imitation. Furthermore this so-called development model degrades human beings, and leaves no room for spiritual development or respect for the indigenous local cultures. It seems that we are forced to drink Coca-cola, wear western dresses and have television sets in every household. Advertising for consumer culture is the new gospel for so-called progress on economic development.

How can people resist this trend? If Japan is the model for a new Life style in Asia, then we have the new gang of four, catching up with Japan very rapidly—namely, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea and Singapore.

Indeed Singapore plays a leading role in the ASEAN context too. She is the smallest and the richest nation which exploits all other SE Asian nations, politically and economically.

Admittedly the peoples in this gang of four countries are on the whole economically better-off than other parts of the Asian region. However, these countries lack basic

human rights. There is no freedom of expression, especially no legitimate dissenting voices against the governments, and no questioning of the legitimacy of the multinational corporations and superpowers operating in these countries.

Although the Japanese enjoy rights and privileges similar to westerners, plus economic security and political freedom, they suffer from the economic exploitative and operative syndrome in the west. Despite the tea ceremonies and the Zen gardens, which should help to calm them down, they are on the whole restless and insecure. They are greed-oriented and hatred oriented, like most who wish to be successful in life.

The reason is very simple. Their lifestyle depends on an unjust and unsustainable socio-economic order. Japan does not only exploit the rest of Asia, but she also exploits the minorities of her own country, like the South Korean workers, the **buraku** and the farmers, especially those who have lost their lands to Narita airport.

Similarly, in North America the natives are just as oppressed as those in other parts of the third world, and most American citizens are not even aware that the USA is the source of world hunger and world poverty. She consumes more power and energy, wastes more food and dumps everything she does not want in the world market in the name of AID or trade both of which have short term profits as the main goal. It is rightly perceived that we in Asia are guinea pigs of the American medical trade. Exporting medicines and transferring of technologies to the third world are indeed very big and dangerous business enterprises. Witness the Union Carbide disaster in India, 1984.

Those of us in Southeast Asia have been penetrated so much by the Japanese and American models of so-called development that we have more or less lost our deeper consciousness, perhaps with the exception of Burma. Consumerism and complex systems of technology penetrate everywhere. Through advertisements and the mass media, we worship money, power and all the false values that go with them.

Education and the established religions teach us to conform to the **status quo** so that we may become the elites and have the chance to be rich and powerful too. As for the masses many seem deluded that this economic status will improve if they are more diligent, do not gamble, become intoxicants or fatalistic, without realizing that all these negative elements are part and parcel of the unjust socio-economic order, created by the First World. It is further exacerbated by the promotion of local warfare within the third world in order that the armaments industries will flourish and the masses will remain in suffering poverty and ignorance. This is indeed human degradation at its worst.

I used to look up to China and South Asia as alternative models for a just and sustainable socio-economic order. With the establishment of the People's Republic of China and her cultural revolution, one would think that there was a real search for an alternative Life-Style. Currently with the four Modernisations, China will certainly be catching up with Japan and western powers. Perhaps the 'New China' is accommodating herself to fit in comfortably with the Hong Kong situation in the near future and the Taiwan model in the not so near future.

People may not be alarmed that the Chinese are now drinking coca cola and giving up chopsticks. Yet one has to think how dangerous this is to indigenous local cultures and habits. We in SE Asia started with coca-cola, then pepsi cola and numerous other soft-drink derivatives. Now all the junk food chains have come in. All these are not only harmful economically and culturally, but are also bad for our health system.

Worst of all in the four Modernisations is ofcourse Armaments. It is bad enough for Japan to be rearmed, but once the Chinese have caught up in this business, there will be no peace in Asia or the world. With the backward military set-up as it is, China is already interfering with Kampuchea and Vietnam.

As for South Asia, we thought the real search for a New Life Style by Gandhiji would have an everlasting impact. The In-

dian non-violent struggle for liberation is certainly, for a Buddhist at least, better than Mao's bloody victory in China. The spirit of non-alignment, the religious tradition which cares for social ethics and the respect for local cultures and customs, as well as a commitment to democracy, freedom and decentralization, would really contribute to an Asian model of a just society, with less affluence perhaps, but more with self respect and self reliance.

Admittedly India inherited a decadent British bureaucratic system and with the presence of Tartar and Bellah, socialism would find itself difficult to coexist with capitalism.

Yet, until recently many of us looked to South Asia, hoping that its leaders would struggle to break through for a just and sustainable socio-political and economic order.

Even with the loss of Pakistan, which opted out for an American consumer culture, through military dictatorship, while paying lip service to the ideal Islamic model, we still had India and Sri Lanka. Now even Sri Lanka wants to become little Singapore, to join the ASEAN club, and ofcourse the new Indian Prime Minister will soon be in Washington. He may maintain his Indian traditional dress, but the new life style for him and his people will be more like the Americans and the Japanese.

By imitating or joining the First World means that there is no development or support of appropriate technology. For the west, including Japan, technology means controlling and exploiting the masses. The more sophisticated technology becomes, it is more our master than our servant. In the beginning it may appear to serve the few at the expense of the many. Yet it will end up by exploiting the few who actually created it. Nuclear armaments are the perfect example of sophisticated technology.

Yet, technologies, like powers, riches and desires are usually those that people crave for. Once you have these, one may think to use them for the benefit of the masses. Indeed you could, but in most cases, they are very complicated and are bound to link with institutional factors which are

geared to oppress and exploit the masses as well as natural phenomena.

At least religious leaders who preach against greed, hatred and delusion, for love, compassion, collaboration, tolerance, detachment and justice should be aware of the danger from inappropriate technologies which are part and parcel of an unjust and unsustainable socio-economic order.

There is now a danger that just as scientists are seen as becoming more religious, theologians are leaving their medieval retreats to embrace materialism. One has to be aware that the quest for spiritual life in the west as well as in Asia, often-times goes against social justice.

With most cultures, religion plays two roles: the priestly and the prophetic. In times of peace, most priests have traditionally sought to maintain the **status quo** within a stable society. The priest has been portrayed as conservative, sometimes even reactionary. They are usually seen as resistant to change. In trouble times, however, they may become 'prophets'. The prophet seizes upon instability within society and uses it as an instrument. They are visionary Utopians, looking beyond the present to a future they believe may be attainable.

As Michael von Bruck rightly quoted Dom Helder Camara, that "*When somebody dreams alone, it is just a dream. But when we all dream together, it is the beginning of reality.*"

This brings to mind Martin Luther King, who really had a dream and his dream by and large has come true. At least he supported the Gandhian vision as a successful proof that non-violent struggle is even possible in the great and violent United States of America.

India certainly had a prophet in the Mahatama, who combined the best elements in Hinduisim, Buddhism and Christianity, for a new life style, which was rooted deeply in the Indian spiritual tradition. Ghandhiji really searched for a just and sustainable socio, political and economic order. Hence he rejected the western model of development and its arms of oppression — technology.

We need to go back to Gandhi, as we

should go back to the Buddha and to Christ, with proper historical perspectives and with critical awareness, for their messages to be perceived as relevant for a more just society.

Japan and the West need the other countries of Asia as we need them. It is especially with the fear of nuclear holocaust in the First World, that we should work with them for a nuclear free society in western Europe and North America. This process will not be possible unless those concerned for peace in the First World link themselves meaningfully to those of the Third World. Peace and alternative models of development must go hand in hand. For a short term policy, we must work together to stop, or at least to reduce, the 87% armaments export to this part of the world.

Together, we could perhaps build awareness of a more just society. Ideally we do not need technology. We only need techniques and applied sciences - natural science and social science - free from western domination. They will then be appropriate for our society. This will really be a new life style — a real return to the sacred, with social justice as the core for personal spiritual development — each to his or her religious and cultural traditions.

To put it in the Buddhist context, we must reconstitute our consciousness to be less selfish — less greedy, less hateful and less

unaware in order that together, we could reconstruct our society to be more just and participatory.

Our religious leaders with proper spiritual self criticism, could become more willing to learn from good friends in other religious traditions as well as from the Marxists and humanists in confronting the unjust socio-economic order of the day mindfully and meaningfully. The Theology of Liberation may be only practical in Latin America or the Philippines, but there is nothing wrong if the Buddhists and Hindus study this and try to integrate its methodology in their own struggles. While trying to solve our daily problems in the short term, we should also look for a common Asian religious approach to liberate ourselves and our society. We shall not overcome unjust systems easily. In turn we shall not be defeated, nor should we hate the oppressors, or become cynics. Daily we must work for our own liberation from desires, while we serve those who suffer like us and more than us, so that we shall sooner, rather than later, be all liberated.

*An address at a conference of Asian Inter religious Concern on Emerging Consciousness for a New Humankind, at Gurukul Lutheran Theological College, Madras, 6 January 1985.*

*“Peace will be assured only if the underlying causes of the prevailing distrust and widespread conflict among nations are successfully dealt with; only if economic and social justice is furthered; and only if the United Nations and other multilateral institutions with responsibility for settling disputes and building the foundations of peace are strengthened and supported. We must dedicate ourselves anew to these objectives today. This is a time for resolution, not discouragement.”*

— From the message of the UN Secretary-General on the International Day of Peace: 18 September 1984