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## Summary

On approaching the turn of the millennium (2000) renowned Buddhist scholar and author Dr. Ananda W.P. Guruge (Late) revisits the vast scope and breadth of mankind's technological advances and asks of us to weigh up the existential threat to humanity and the profound inequities that have arisen from the concentration of wealth and power that has resulted.

Dr Guruge reaches back to the ancient past to look for a way forward for our world.

### HOW BUDDHISTS SHOULD WELCOME THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

By Ananda W.P. Guruge (Ambassador of Permanent Delegate (Sri Lanka) in Paris, France)

In the last decade of the twentieth century, we focus our attention on the new century that will soon dawn with promise and anxiety, hopes and fears, aspirations and apprehensions. Humanity would look back on the last two centuries in particular with an unprecedented sense of pride, achievement and fulfilment but, nevertheless, with also a disquieting feeling of disappointment, if not dejection.

While gloating over the spectacular successes in science and technology, conquest of nature, inroads into space, mastery over disease, advances in communication and the like, we wonder whether all these achievements are of equal benefit to humankind as a whole or whether these have been accomplished with justifiable means. At what price have we achieved an incredible prosperity for a relatively small fraction of humanity? In the process, how much irreparable damage have we done to planet earth through our greed and ignorance by polluting the irreplaceable natural resources?

With continuing destruction of the ozone layer and the resulting global warming, to what extent have we endangered life on earth? How many thousands of species, both flora and fauna, have become extinct in the face of our wilful encroachment or unpardonable neglect? How much more irreparable damage will we do until humankind becomes fully conscious of its ecological responsibility? I have no doubt that there arises a tinge of guilt in the mind of every responsible human being as he or she asks himself or herself these ineluctable questions?

The spectre of hunger, malnutrition, disease and preventable death stalks over vast continents as deserts advance at a galloping pace over once smiling green fields and millions are driven away from their homelands in search of the barest means of survival. Two thirds of the world's population live in abject poverty deprived of a minimum of food, clothing and shelter

even to ensure them a modicum of human dignity. A billion adults, mostly women, remain illiterate and have no access to essential knowledge for better and more dignified living.

Alongside poor, debt-burdened developing countries, which ask for nothing more from the world than a fair and reasonable price for the products of their labour, are those rich nations which still think that a pittance of foreign aid - more often than not with strings attached - is all they owe their less fortunate fellow humans. But the tragedy is that the same kind of exploitation of the poor and the weak which we unhesitatingly condemn in world forums does exist in diverse forms within every nation.

With mind-boggling advances in knowledge, we had hoped that science and technology would solve problems of food, health, housing, communication and environment. Instead, what we see is that close upon half a million of the best scientists in the world devote their supremely invaluable talents to the perfection of increasingly deadly weapons of destruction. Yet we are mesmerised by them to such an extent that even forums dedicated to world peace do not see the incongruity of expressing gratitude for what are called non-military spin-offs of military research. Not only are the fears of a deliberate or accidental nuclear holocaust real, but the fact is undeniable that the arms race deprives nations of their scarce resources for development and the indiscriminate arms sale has brought violence and insecurity to everyone's doorstep. The much-publicised end of the super-power Cold War could hardly generate a sense of global peace and confidence before great nations began disintegration with resulting danger of potential conflict.

With developments in human and social sciences, we also hoped that we would discover ways and means of improving interpersonal relations and pave the way for societies to eliminate social inequalities and that men, women and themselves in a collective effort to enhance their opportunities for a better life. But these remain receding goals even as we understand more and more the needs and the motivations of humankind. The human and social scientist may not throw up his hands in despair at the moment, but will insist that human nature still needs to be understood.

Yet, with our increasing awareness of global social problems, we are appalled by the deterioration of basic human values. How else could human society allow innocent children to be abused and neglected, women to be exploited and humiliated and the most dangerous narcotics and drugs to be peddled about with no scruples whatsoever?

It is with such a balance sheet that we prepare ourselves for our different roles in the new century. We are elated with the gigantic victories of humankind in diverse fields but, at the same time, we are perturbed by the accusations of our inner conscience. We cannot deny that we have paid too dearly for our materialistic achievements, whose beneficiaries are only a small minority. This inordinate price has been not only in terms of the damage to the environment but more so in terms of sacrificing basic human values of equity and social justice, kindness and compassion, moderation and generosity.

If this truly is how we feel, are we not in the same frame of mind as Emperor Asoka on the day he was victorious in his war against Kalinga? Here was a conqueror who, at the height of his military career, asked himself if the price of victory paid in terms of human lives and suffering was justified or permissible. His conscience, undoubtedly, replied with a resounding 'No'. Therefore, he abandoned war and violence forever and expounded *Dharmavijaya* or Conquest by Righteousness as the one and only noble pursuit for both monarch and commoner.

Emperor Asoka's principles and methods of *Dharmavijaya* are as relevant to us in our present crisis as they were twenty-three centuries ago. It was founded on the conviction that the human being is basically good and just and all that is necessary is to help one to guide one's life on a simple and practical code of ethics.

It is undeniable that Emperor Asoka found this code of ethics in the Noble Teachings of the Buddha. But Asoka did not tell his people that he was teaching them Buddhism. He made no reference to even the fundamental doctrines of the Buddha such as the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path or *Nibbana*, because it was neither philosophy nor ultimate emancipation that concerned him. But the essence of Buddhism he gave his people through all means of dissemination of information which were current in his day.

Further, to show that it was virtue that he valued and not individual sects and schools of religion, he not only supported every traditional religion but strongly advocated inter-religious tolerance and amity. His most fervent plea was not to speak disparagingly of other religions but to seek co-operation so that the essentials of righteousness could be jointly developed through each and every one of them.

With Asoka's magnificent example to emulate, we, who have chosen to be guided by the Noble Teachings of the Buddha, should examine in what way Buddhism, with its rich diversity of observances around its noteworthy doctrinal unity, could serve humanity today. With the Buddha's overarching emphasis on the Four Sublime States of *Brahmavihara*, namely *Metta*, loving kindness, *Karuna*, compassion, *Mudita*, Sympathetic or Participatory Joy and Felicitation and *Upekkha*, Equality and Equanimity, Buddhism cannot but be conscious of the glaring imbalances which divide humanity today. Our attention needs to be focused on how Buddhists, in unity, could dedicate themselves to bring about the most urgent of all conquests by righteousness and that is to conquer greed and avarice, hatred and violence, and delusion and ignorance so that all beings shall be happy and contented and each, in his or her own way and pace, shall strive for their ultimate deliverance from misery and suffering and endless births and deaths.

*Sabbe satta bhavantu sukhitatta!*

Ananda W.P. Guruge.