

# BUDDHISM-THE PANACEA FOR THE MODERN WORLD

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**Abstract:** Religious ideologies are unique in themselves. They are steadfast and obstinate about the means through which they claim to take the followers to the destination. A close study of Buddhism, however sheds light on the fact that it has been the “least dogmatic” of all religions. The Buddhist teachings have been placed in comparison with the ‘tenets’ of other religions. The towering antiquity of Hinduism and its obscure caste theory, the internationalization of Christianity, the dictatorial dogma of Islam and the claims of Semitic superiority of Judaism have all been found to be ‘organized indoctrinations’ that have promoted more obscurantism than enlightenment to this world. Buddhism on the other hand has not produced an agenda around which its principles revolve! It has not propounded and expounded any spiritual theory! On the contrary, the other religions have been beset by obscurantist dogmas that leave the followers confused and confounded. This article is not a panegyric on Buddhism. Neither is it an attempt to satirize the other religions. The subject of this article is not religion at all. On the other hand, it offers a wishful thinking for a moment; if the modern world followed the non-dogmatic teachings of the Buddha, it would be a better place!!!

**Keywords:** Panacea, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Pagan worship, The Vedas, The supernatural, Monotheism, Polytheism, Dogmas, Doctrines, Allah, The scriptures, The prophet, Abraham, Israel, Jesus Christ, The crucifixion, The resurrection, Papalism, Ecumenism, The Buddha, Tolerance, Enlightenment.

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## I. AN OVERVIEW

The world has already fallen into the clutches of religions. Beginning from the pagan worship of the Stone Age and to the organized religious worship till date, the world has submitted itself consciously and unconsciously to different forms of faiths or beliefs. And the religious dogmas have become as popular as the dogmas of Communism, fascism, Nazism, Semitism and the likes. An analyst would find it hard to distinguish between religious and political theories.

Under these circumstances, Buddhism becomes relevant to the ailing world torn apart by vociferous ideologies, dogmas and tenets of faiths or beliefs. The sacrosanct nature of these beliefs has eaten into the fabrics of the world societies irrespective of their nationalities or creed. Dictionaries have brazenly included the usage “to follow something religiously” to mean “following something in letter” or “doing a work regularly/perfectly/with dedication”. Such is the influence of the word ‘religion’ to the world.

There is basically nothing wrong in following a faith or even a political ideology. Despite the vehement criticism against Hitler’s persecution of the Jews, none would deny him the distinction of being a staunch patriot or nationalist. His ideology of Nazism was a religion in itself to him. A close perusal of his autobiographical manifesto, MEIN KAMPF convincingly sheds light on his desire for a prosperous Germany.

However, the dogmas and doctrines of the organized religions do more harm to the world than good. Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam have been quintessentially dogmatic and ‘doctrine-savvy’ in their outlook. The followers across the world have embraced their doctrines. For the world believes religions are synonymous with the redemption of the mankind! Contextually, most countries believe their political ideologies could bring in redemption and ensure prosperity to their people. Renowned ideologies of Communism, Fascism, and Nazism can be good case studies here. Psychologists

have no hesitation what so ever in emphasizing that doctrines, dogmas and ideologies have led to a ‘servility of thoughts’.

Under these circumstances, a close study of the Buddha’s teachings reveals that Buddhism does not suffer from the megalomania of ‘organized doctrines’ and ‘ideologies’ like the organized religions of the world.

Let us look at the religions with ‘obscurantist dogmas’ as against Buddhism which has only a set of ‘unequivocal’ teachings that are simple to follow:

## II. HINDUISM

It is believed to be the oldest of all religions. Scholars are still divided in their opinion as to the origin of this religion. The conflicting accounts of scholars notwithstanding, inferences can be made that at the time of its origin it was not an organized faith as it is today. Even before the VEDAS came into existence there had been a practice of worshipping the elements of nature.

The second phase saw the advent of Vedas and the Vedic scholars (believed to be Aryans- an unverified claim, indeed.)The faith was hammered into a shape. Millions of deities were born. Places of worship were built. Scriptures were soon to follow. Needless to say dogmas were soon born. A person seeking the blessings of the SUPREME BEING or GOD needed to go through a sequence of customs. Life had now become more complicated than before!

### *The Caste System*

Hinduism is credited with the creation of caste system. The Vedic scholars argue that the four major classes KSHATRIYAS, BRAHMANS, VAISHYAS and SHUDRAS were created to build the edifice of a duty-filled society. The KSHATRIYAS were royals. The BRAHMANS were scholars (who knew the incantations to invoke the deities for the benefit of all-baseless claim).The VAISHYAS were predominantly the business class. The SHUDRAS were the middle class. All those who did not belong to the above classes were low castes or untouchables.

The argument of the Vedic scholars that the Upper classes were created to build the edifice of a duty-filled society is far removed from truth. On the other hand it was ‘divisive’ in character and it created an ‘oppressive’ class which would someday engage itself in a violent rebellion.

Education and scholastic pursuits were the prerogatives of the upper class! Again the Vedic scholars argue that the intricacies of science, philosophy, numerical aptitude, grammar and literature were too good to be mastered by the lower classes. This is yet another theory that divided the social classes bitterly!!

### *The Obscurantist Philosophy*

The Brahmins were deemed to be scholars whose incantations alone could invoke the deities who in turn would bless all the masses. The Vedic scholars are quick to defend this. They say the incantations could be whispered and chanted by only scholars with exceptional command over language, rhyme and rhythm. More over the deities demanded customs, rituals and unique patterns so as to be pleased. Only the Brahmins knew the rituals that were too sacrosanct to be handled by other classes. The theory continues to show Hinduism in poor light even today!!!

There is no gain saying the fact that the scriptures are the most enlightening pieces of work that embellish Hinduism’s repository of literature. It can be assumed without prejudice that the greatness of Hinduism rests on scriptures. There scriptures have been translated into a substantial number of languages! Philosophers and scholars from the West and East vouch for their greatness!

However, the scriptures are basically for the consumption of the erudite class. Unfortunately, the erudite class statistically will not constitute even a percentage of this world’s population. The philosophy in the scriptures would simply sound ‘obscurantist’ to most readers. The concepts of DHARMA and ADHARMA are best understood by interpreters and analysts.

The theories of qualities such as SATVIK, RAJASIK and TAMASIK are not for lay man’s consumption. The verses from THE GITA are undoubtedly enlightening. But have these verses reached the multitudes of this world?

Failure to comprehend a piece of written work does not render it 'obscurantist'. In the case of Hindu scriptures the obscurantism refers to the vagueness they create in leaving room for various interpretations at the hands of the readers. Vagueness or obliqueness is far from ideal in running the governance of this world.

### ***Polytheism***

Hinduism is the most polytheistic of all religions. One might be tempted to argue that MAHAYANA BUDDHISM is polytheistic. But a close study of Buddhist literature would reveal that Buddhism is predominantly a monotheistic faith. (Let us reserve it later under the discussion on BUDDHISM). In Hinduism there are millions of deities and sub deities. Every deity calls for 'specific patterns' of worship. These patterns of worship are known only to the BRAHMANS. Invocation of every deity requires command of incantation, time and energy. YAGAS performed by the believers include incantations to multiple deities. This excessively ritualistic outlook has often invited criticism and rightly so!

### ***Status of Women***

One cannot go over board and say women enjoy a subservient status in Hinduism. However, there is no literature evident to say women enjoy an empowered status. Sadly, no organized religion ever bothers about this!! The stories and anecdotes from Hindu epics however, tend to mislead the world. Sri Ram's decree that Sita should bathe in fire and come out pure to prove her chastity is often cited as male chauvinism. Draupadi's acceptance of the five Pandavas as her husbands is quite often looked upon with derision. One has to infer that the status of women remains ambiguous in Hinduism!!

This is not to argue that the women portrayed in the epics enjoy a subservient nature. However, the portrayal of women suffers from equivocation and ambiguities. The imageries, personifications or euphemisms intended to convey a message can seldom be comprehended by an ordinary reader. The description of Lord Krishna courting many women can perhaps be symbolic in character. But then scholars need to slog hard to get the intended message across! In an age of internet, descriptions that are loaded with figures of speech can indeed have few takers!

### ***Elitist Agenda***

For centuries the religion has followed an ELITIST AGENDA where divisions based on affluence and non-affluence have bitterly divided people. The rulers and their sycophants have always constituted the power block. The rest of the people in the hierarchy depending on the order of merit have constituted the 'ruled classes'. This has given birth to the oppressors and the oppressed. A theory which continues to haunt the society even today!

The scriptures talk of showing obeisance to elders or prostrating before the 'revered being'. The practice has given room to an "organized sycophancy" today. Disciples prostrating before spiritual gurus and followers prostrating before their 'beloved leaders' have basically found their origin from the ELITIST AGENDA.

### ***Superstitions***

Superstitions make or mar a society! Unscientific and superstitious beliefs and practices have shown this religion in poor light. Sacrifice of lives at the altar of Gods and Goddesses, is a practice prevalent in many parts of India today. Practices like SATI are still prevalent in some parts of the country despite the legal ban on them!

### ***The Silver Lining***

In all fairness, it should be admitted that Hinduism is one of the most accommodative of faiths. The occasions like marriages and other institutional practices do not warrant approval from the religious pontiffs or hierarchies. It is not incumbent upon these practices to be solemnized under the invariable surveillance of authorities. Moreover, if one understands the faith well, it could emerge (although after painstaking perusal of the scriptures) that it is 'a way of life'.

### ***Is It The Real Panacea?***

What does the world need today? The lofty dogmas of Hinduism cannot be the panacea much needed to the world. For Hinduism needs to redefine itself; needs to rid itself all its antiquated practices! Hindu scholars need to work on and redefine it so as to address its afore-mentioned inadequacies! We could only keep our fingers crossed in this regard!

## **II. JUDAISM**

Scholars unanimously agree that Judaism is one of the oldest of monotheistic faiths. The followers of this faith are the Jews across the globe, especially Israel. In this religion the Hebrew God is portrayed as unitary and solitary. The Hebrew God is the protector of the world and the people He has created.

### ***Ethical Monotheism***

Ethical monotheism is a principle that emphasizes that God is an invariably single entity and He is concerned with the actions of the mankind! Thus His principle relationships are not with other Gods, but with the people He has created!

***The Torah***

The first five books of the HEBREW BIBLE constitute THE TORAH which encompasses the laws and teachings of Judaism. Besides, some unwritten teachings also constitute the dogmas of Judaism. These oral traditions found invariable mention later in the holy books of THE MISNAH and THE TALMUD.

***The God and the Covenant***

As far as the Jewish beliefs confirm, God made an agreement or covenant with Abraham, the great ancestor of the Jewish people. Abraham and his descendants were assured of blessings if they worshipped God and remained faithful to Him. Covenants were also made between Abraham's son and grandson Isaac and Jacob, respectively! Jacob was also known as Israel and his descendants were known as 'children of Israel'.

***The Chosen People***

The Jews are often referred to as the CHOSEN PEOPLE. For they have special duties and services to be rendered to the mankind as ordained by their God. Jews believe that God will send a MESSIAH to save them.

***The Commandments***

The Jews believe that Moses brought the TEN COMMANDMENTS and THE TORAH down from Mount Sinai. Views are slightly polarized amongst the Jewish scholars as regards the origin of THE TORAH. Liberal Jews believe that THE TORAH was inspired by God, but written by human beings. However, the dissimilarities of views in no way hold any significance as far as the unity of JUDAISM is concerned! The TEN COMMANDMENTS have prescriptions and proscriptions for leading a just life!

***Shabbat (Sabbath)***

SHABBAT or SABBATH comes under the commandments. It begins every Friday at sunset and ends on Saturday at night fall. It is a day to thank God for creating this universe! Many Jews go to their place of worship (synagogue) to pray on the day of Shabbat.

Conservative Jews observe special rules on Shabbat. They refrain from engaging themselves in creative work. They even go as far as not using electronic gadgets, driving cars and bicycles. However, a consensus is found in the outlook of the Jews of the modern era!

***The Messiah***

It is a common Jewish belief that God will send a MESSIAH to save them. The word comes from the Hebrew word 'Meshiah' which means the 'anointed one'.

***The Limited Appeal***

In a global context, the faith has only a limited appeal. The faith is confined to the Jews living all across the world. While conversions to Judaism from other faiths are not forbidden, statistically there are fewer 'converts' to this faith in comparison with the other Abrahamic faiths!

***How Far Can It Address The Disillusionment?***

In spite of all its well-conceived and disseminated tenets, there is no gain saying the fact that it is dogma-ridden in its outlook! The world has already experienced the darker side of religious, political and social dogmas or doctrines. It cannot afford to fall into the vicious ravines of dogma again. Therefore, Judaism is certainly not the panacea the world has been looking forward to!

**III. CHRISTIANITY**

It is an Abrahamic religion that began as a Jewish sect. Records reveal it originated in the Levant region of the Middle East. Historical evidences confirm its prolific growth across the region. (Syria, Mesopotamia, Asia Minor and Egypt)

***Chief Tenet***

The chief tenet of Christianity is the belief in Jesus as the son of God and the MESSIAH. It is a Christian belief that Jesus was anointed by God as the savior of humanity.

***Jesus Christ, the God Incarnate***

Christians generally believe that Jesus is GOD INCARNATE (some conflicting theological accounts still prevail in this regard). Having incarnated as a human, he suffered the pain and temptations of a mortal. He indeed led an exemplary life and remained an embodiment of virtuous qualities such as compassion, sacrifice, just behavior, integrity and righteousness! The canonized gospels of MATHEW and LUKE say Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of Virgin Mary.

***One of the Greatest Teachers!***

Jesus Christ is revered as one of the greatest teachers the world has produced even if we view his teachings from a purely ‘irreligious perspective’. The preceding paragraph has already enlisted Jesus Christ’s most virtuous qualities. His teaching of non-violence and peace have inspired many greats like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.

***The Gospels***

The gospels describe the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The most popular ones are the canonical gospels of MATHEW, MARK, LUKE and JOHN. Christians consider the four canonical gospels to be the revelation from God.

***The Christian Bible***

The phrase ‘Christian Bible’ is deliberately used here! For the term BIBLE refers to a canonized collection of texts sacred in Judaism and Christianity! There are old and new testaments to the Christian Biblical canon. The Christians consider the old and new testaments of THE BIBLE sacred. However, the new testament as confirmed by history is chiefly responsible for the prolific publicity of Christian literature!

***The Crucifixion***

Jesus Christ’s teachings were resented by the Jewish rulers who viewed his preaching as ‘political treason’ and nailed him to a cross atop a mountain. The popular Christian belief is that Jesus resurrected on the third day and appeared before many people over a span of forty days. Finally, he was led to heaven and offered a seat beside the God.

***Popularity Ruined By Factionalism***

Compelling evidences assure that Christianity has the ‘highest popularity’ among the three Abrahamic faiths! However like most popular faiths, movements or ideologies, Christianity confronts the stark and inescapable reality of factionalism. Liberal commentators are unanimous in stating that this has ruined the popularity of this faith!

***Papal Supremacy***

It is basically the doctrine of the ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH that the Pope is the VICAR OF JESUS CHRIST and hence wields supreme universal power over the church! There is wide spread criticism that the papal supremacy is motivated by the dark desire to control ‘power blocks’ and kingdoms!

***Ecumenism***

The emergence of different denominations of Christianity has caused a big apprehension to spiritual scholars and liberal minds. This has led to the initiative by name ECUMENISM. It aims at the inter-denominational Christian unity amongst churches separated by doctrine, history and practice. But it could simply be fallacious to mistake this for inter faith pluralism. For reasons that are obvious, the theory of ECUMENISM has not worked wonders to address the denominational and factional outlook of Christianity!

***The Demand and Supply***

The malady-stricken world demands a panacea. The disillusioned world is looking for enlightenment to rid itself of all the maladies that have rendered it perennially ill. The unfortunate truth is that Christianity for all its global appeal cannot inspire confidence and offer panacea for the ailing world! Contextually, it should be emphasized that Jesus Christ’s socialistic outlook could have been of great significance here but for the denominations and the papal agenda adopted by the faith, today!!

#### IV. ISLAM

Islam is the third Abrahamic faith in the order. Like Judaism it is a monotheistic faith. The followers of Islamic faith are called Muslims. The adherents of Islamic faith invariably believe that God is a single and incomparable entity. They also believe that it is the most complete version of Abrahamic faith which was already revealed to the mankind by prophets like ADAM, NOAH, ABRAHAM and MOSES, However, the revelations (according to the Islamic believers) had been misrepresented !This gave birth to a new set of revelations that would soon be the tenets of Islamic faith.

Prophet Mohammad is believed to have received the revelations of God in piece meals (through the angel, Gabriel). These divine revelations formulate the principles of Islam.

##### *The Holy Quran*

THE QURAN is the holy book of the Muslims. The contents of this scripture are basically the revelations received by Prophet Mohammad and handed down to the immediate followers and the posterity. The unassailable belief is that the verses of THE QURAN are a testimony to Mohammad's prophet hood.

##### *Five Pillars of Islam*

- 1)Shahadah:It is an invariable declaration that there is no God but ALLAH(Islamic name for God) and Mohammad is his messenger.
- 2)Salat:Well-organized(ritualized) prayers(five times a day)
- 3)Zakat:Donation of 2.5% of one's savings to the non-affluent and needy.
- 4)Sawm:Fasting and self-restraint during the holy month of Ramadan.
- 5)Hajj: A pilgrimage to Mecca at least once a life time(depending on one's affluence)

##### *The Spread of Islam*

Like Christianity, the Islamic faith has spread to all parts of the world. The five pillars of Islam and its monotheistic outlook have perhaps influenced its following! The discipline and dedication with which the followers submit themselves to this faith are quite conspicuous to the world.

##### *Prescriptions and Proscriptions*

Islam calls for the strict and unconditional adherence to the verses of the HOLY QURAN. The followers of the faith are expected to understand, read and recite the verses without fail. Non-adherence to the scriptures or verses is seen as a gross violation of the tenets of Islam. The followers of Islamic faith shall not worship idols or images of Gods. Neither shall they visualize the form of the God.

The Islamic scholars from Saudi Arabia and Egypt (I have had the privilege to interact with) argue that the insistence on strict adherence to the scriptures is nothing but the discipline that is to be learnt, appreciated and practiced throughout one's life. On questions about the 'holy war' and 'infidels', the scholars observe that Islam preaches peace and the aforementioned questions do not have anything to do with followers of other faiths. These are views that need to be respected. Analysis of the above views is indeed not the subject of this article!

##### *Dogmas and the World*

We have yet another faith that is invariably dogmatic and doctrine-driven! As mentioned earlier, the world is simply not desperate for dogmas or doctrines. It needs enlightenment to help itself fight the disillusionment.(mentioned throughout this article).Needless to say, our search for enlightenment to save the world, still continues!

#### V. BUDDHISM

Is Buddhism a religion? The Webster Dictionary tells us that a religion "is an organized system of beliefs, rites and celebrations centered on a super natural being; belief pursued with devotion". In all the religions or faiths we have seen so far there is a supernatural being or there are deities to whose will the human beings must invariably submit.

Buddhism does not qualify as a religion as it never believes there is a supernatural being whose will and decree are to be revered and considered sacrosanct! We have so far seen monotheistic and polytheistic faiths!

Buddhism is a faith which is far from theistic in its outlook. We shall use the term 'religion' here only in a narrow sense. It encompasses a variety of traditions, beliefs and practices largely based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama who is known as THE BUDDHA (the awakened soul)

Siddhartha Gautama was born into a royal family. As a young prince, he realized that power, pelf and the royal extravaganza would not guarantee happiness or peace in life. On the other hand they would lead to disillusionment leaving one unenlightened all his life!! So he gave up his royal life and sought enlightenment. On being enlightened, he spent the rest of his life teaching the world!

### ***Is Buddha A God?***

The Buddha is indeed not a God. He is a great teacher whose teachings have helped people lead happy lives over the centuries!! The Buddha teaches one to be aware of one's own 'self' rather than submitting himself to supernatural powers. One is reminded of John Milton's words; MIND IN ITS OWN PLACE CAN CREATE A HEAVEN OF HELL AND HELL OF HEAVEN. Non-violence, peace, righteous action and compassion for fellow beings are some of the chief teachings of Buddhism. These are almost identical to the teachings of Jesus Christ!

### ***Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eight Fold Path***

The four noble truths and the noble eight fold path would more or less sum up Buddhism. The first truth of life is suffering as an inescapable reality. Health issues, untimely death, frustrations, anger and other sensory outlooks are part of a life span. One needs to accept these as realities rather than pain. A close understanding of this reality can mitigate one's suffering. The second truth says that suffering is caused by desire or expectations. Wants often deprive us of happiness. For wants can lead us astray and make us avaricious. Hence one has to limit his needs or wants so as to avoid agony and disappointment in life!! The third truth is the extension of the second one. It says suffering can be overcome and contentment can be achieved provided we give up our cravings and live each day as it comes. Neither the past nor the future should concern us. This is the state of NIRVANA. The fourth noble truth is an earnest appeal to adhere to the NOBLE EIGHT FOLD PATH which advises us to be moral in words, deeds and the way in which we conduct our lives! The understanding and practice of THE NOBLE EIGHT FOLD PATH can lead to wisdom and self-consummation of thoughts!

### ***The Karma***

Basically Karma is the law that every action has a reaction. Every individual is responsible for his actions in the past and present. One has to analyze the karmic effects of his actions; one has to analyze its consequences on his own self, others and the entire society!

### ***Wisdom***

Buddhism teaches that wisdom should be developed with compassion. One can be a bigot and still gain knowledge. However this is not wisdom. True wisdom comes from an unbigoted mind which has compassion and empathy for the society. No wisdom gained is for satisfying oneself. On the other hand true wisdom lies in one's SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS. (Karl Marx shall have no reservations in endorsing this precept!!!)

### ***Compassion***

Compassion here refers to the sympathy and empathy one has for the fellow beings. We understand ourselves fully only when we understand others.

### ***Buddhism and Other Faiths***

Statistical inputs confirm that Buddhism has always co-existed with other faiths. Instances of interfaith plurality initiatives have been well-documented! Evidences suggest that Buddhism agrees with the moral teachings of most religions on earth. However, it goes further by adding 'more enlightenment' to help us lead a peaceful life. Buddhism (as per available evidences) is quite careful about using labels like 'Christian', 'Muslim', 'Hindu' or 'Buddhist'. There have never been wars fought in the name of Buddhism. (a few sectarian skirmishes reported on rare occasions are just aberrations and cannot have any impact on the common Buddhist teachings!)

***No Dogmas, No Scriptures***

While the Buddha's teachings have been documented, they are never converted into scriptures. Neither have the teachings been converted into dogmas or doctrines so as to propound and expound a spiritual theory. It should however be conceded that some universities have BUDDHIST STUDIES as a discipline. Nevertheless, this has no influence on the widely held view that Buddhist teachings are non-dogmatic!!

***The Science***

Science always confirms a truth through experiments. Buddhist teachings exhort the human beings to convert perceptions into experiences and feel the change in their lives. PERCEPTIONS THAT ARE PUT TO REAL LIFE EXPERIENCES WOULD SIMPLY TURN TO TRUTHS-says Edwin Murray, a famous social psychologist. The Buddhist teachings are to be understood, appreciated and experienced!!

As mentioned earlier the Buddha is not a God. Neither do the Buddhists worship idols or images. In some sects of Buddhism, the followers express their obeisance before the statue of the Buddha. This is in fact not idol worship.

***The Ailing World Indeed Requires Buddhism!***

An apprehension has been expressed throughout this article that dogma and doctrine-ridden faiths cannot help fight the disillusionment of this world. More over these dogmas and doctrines do very little to promote and encourage inter faith pluralities! One needs to call a spade a spade, here!!

Have a close look at the Buddhist teachings. There is seldom a piece of teaching that cannot go well with any of the other faiths discussed and analyzed here! The world needs peace and a respite from the ever increasing disillusionment!

The questions on our ailments should be sought within the 'self'. The answers will soon emerge that only the 'self' can address our worries. Super natural beings are unlikely to address our worries unless we seek to find enlightenment through motivating the 'self'.

A panacea is certainly in sight! How best the world uses the panacea is best left for the time to tell!!

**VI. CONCLUSION**

The article owes it gratitude to all scholars from different faiths who have happily offered their inputs as regards their faiths. The conclusion that Buddhism is the panacea for this modern world is indeed a consensus none would resent. For all statistical inputs weigh heavily in favor of Buddhism rendering the conclusion quite scientific!