

## THE CHANGING QUALITY OF LIFE

by

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When poet W H Davies (1870 - 1940) exclaimed, "A poor life this, if full of care/We have no time to stand and stare"<sup>1</sup>, he was making a reflective value judgement about the changing quality of life in his time. If you were born without a silver spoon in your mouth, and if your vision of the good life includes highly processed, neatly packaged food and drink, elegant clothes, well- built houses, electric lights, colour television, motor cars, telephones, stereophonic music, personal computers and so on, you may have to spend so much of your time and energy in their pursuit that you may not have much time left to enjoy them. If so, the quality of your life may be poor, not because you don't have enough but because you can't be yourself<sup>2</sup>. This may well be the lot of many middle-class people living today.

Until a few decades ago some of the goods listed above were simply not available or were way beyond the wildest dreams of the vast majority of people on earth. In the million year history of Homo sapiens, "The Affluent Society" described by John Kenneth Galbraith dawned for the common white man in Europe and North America not more than a mere century ago. And the affluent society celebrated by Galbraith included not much more than "access to amenities - foods, entertainment, personal transportation and plumbing"<sup>3</sup>. Throughout most of recorded history, only the rich and the high lived the good life. Poverty - abject poverty - was the normal lot of ordinary people. Charles Kingsley (1819 - 1875) was speaking for the vast majority of his compatriots when he lamented: "Oh England is a pleasant place for them that's rich and high/But England is a cruel place for such poor folks as I."

To be sure, the best things in life - the ecstasy of love, the warmth of friendship, the joy of artistic creation, the ineffable peace that sages report from unitive knowledge of the Atman that is Brahman pervading the cosmos - are things that money cannot buy. But it is also true that things money can buy, are not necessarily incompatible with those that money can't. The quality of life of a poor man who knows the ecstasy of love may be exquisite, but that is in spite of and not because of his poverty. The sad truth is that for most people, unwilling mortification of the flesh is the fundamental fact of life. That is probably why Anatole France (1844 - 1924) felt able to summarise the story of Man in just seven words: "He was born. He suffered. He died."

Some 2500 years ago the Buddha (623 - 543 BC) taught that life is suffering<sup>4</sup>. "One thing I teach" he said, "dukkha and the ending of dukkha." He was, of course, using the untranslatable word "dukkha" in a profound sense, but the term also includes the suffering and sorrow occasioned by such things as disease, old age and death. Let us not pile on the agony. Let us face it: the quality of life of most people for most of the time has been, and is, poor at best and intolerable at worst. There is, however, no point