

BUDDHISM AND CONSUMER ETHICS

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The emerging profit-driven global economy is guided by unbridled development and gigantism. Such an economy is also coming under ever increasing domination of science and technology. Such a development is not only cutting us off from nature and one another but also undermining natural and cultural diversity. One major consequence of this is that our very survival is threatened. Moreover, the global economy is overwhelmingly controlled and run by consumerism and salespersons in which things are bought not because people need them but because they want them. The modern economic notion that more production of goods would make people happy is misplaced. As pointed out by Schumacher, “An attitude to life which seeks fulfillment in the single-minded pursuit of wealth- in short, materialism- does not fit into this world, because it contains within itself no limiting principle, while the environment in which it is placed is strictly limited... The modern economy is propelled by a frenzy of greed and indulges in an orgy of envy, and these are not accidental features but the very causes of its expansionist success... such causes... carry within themselves the seeds of destruction” (1973: 17-18). Thus, we need to seriously examine not only our attitudes and lifestyles but also our policies that govern the use of renewable and non-renewable resources, science and technology, and the scale and direction of industrialization.

As compared to this, Buddhist economy is based on the motto of happiness and welfare of maximum number of people (*bahujanahitāya bahujanasukhāya: Vinaya Piṭaka.I.21*). Buddhist Economics does not necessarily see unbridled modernism and westernization as a positive phenomenon as it is responsible for many of the major problems that we face today. A modern Buddhist scholar, for instance, has pointed out that “Modernity is rejected because it is seen as a form of life that has in a short period of time despoiled the landscape and done irreparable damage to the environment (Lancaster 2002: 1-2).

Interdependence and Reciprocity are Fundamental to Buddhist Economic Thought: Not only the inherent value of life itself but also the interdependence and reciprocity of human and other forms of life are a fundamental Buddhist belief. Thus, nature and humanity on the one hand and humans amongst themselves on the other are seen as mutually obligated to each other. A living entity can neither isolate itself from this causal nexus nor have an essence of its own. In other words, as part of the *Dependent Arising (paṭiccasamuppāda)*, humans are seen as affecting their environment not only through the purely physical aspects of their actions, but also through the moral and immoral qualities of such actions. That is, karmic effects sometimes catch up with people via their environment. It is thus said that, if a king and his people act unrighteously, this has a bad effect on the environment and its gods, leading to little rain, poor crops and weak, short-lived people (*Aṅguttara Nikāya.II.74-76*). This message is also strongly implied by the *Aggañña Suttanta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya* (III.80-98), which shows how in the beginning nature was bountiful, but it became less so when humans began to take greedily from it. When they began to harvest more rice than they needed, it was not naturally able to grow quickly enough. This necessitated cultivation which in turn caused division of land into private fields, so that property was invented. Origin of private property became the root cause of different social and economic ills. Here, then, is a vision of how sentient beings are affected by what they take from their environment.

Buddhist Economics is guided by Cooperation and Human Well-being instead of Competitiveness and Exploitation: Our current socioeconomic system promotes competition rather than cooperation. This is bound to generate conflict and resentment. A society founded upon

the Buddhist Dharma recognizes that one should aim at promoting the good of the greater unit to which one belongs, and as a minimum one must not look for one's own satisfaction in ways that may cause harm to others. Thus, in Buddhist approach to social and economic development, the primary criterion governing policy formulation must be the well-being of members of the society as a whole. Production must serve the real needs of the people, not the demands of the economic system. In such a system, economic development would be guided not by maximum consumption but sane and rational consumption furthering human well-being. Buddhism promotes a wide distribution of basic necessities so that no one has to suffer deprivation as deprivation is the root cause of social conflict. Thus, talking about the cause of social conflict, the Buddha pointed out that, "goods not being bestowed on the destitute poverty grew rife; from poverty growing rife stealing increased, from the spread of stealing violence grew apace, from the growth of violence, the destruction of life became common" (*Dīgha Nikāya*.III.67).

Buddhist Economics is devoid of Egoism and Greed: Hoarding wealth in any form is looked down upon in Buddhism (A.III.222) and if a wealthy person were to enjoy his wealth all by himself only, it would be a source of failure for him (Sn.v.102). In fact, pride of wealth or economic snobbery is given in Buddhism as a cause of one's downfall (Sn.v.104). As pointed out by Fromm, the present system generates greed and selfishness in which personal success is valued more highly than social responsibility. "It is no longer shocking when political leaders and business executives make decisions that seem to be to their personal advantage, but at the same time are harmful and dangerous to the community... At the same time, the general public is also so selfishly concerned with their private affairs that they pay little attention to all that transcends the personal realm" (Fromm 1976: 10-11). Our modern dinosaur society has become a greedy society and we do not know when enough is enough. A society driven by greed loses the power of seeing things in their wholesomeness. "The hope... that by the single-minded pursuit of wealth, without bothering our heads about spiritual and moral questions, we could establish peace on earth, is an unrealistic, unscientific, and irrational hope... the foundations of peace cannot be laid by universal prosperity, in the modern sense, because such prosperity, if attainable at all, is attainable only by cultivating such drives of human nature as greed and envy... making inordinately large demands on limited world resources and... (putting rich people) on an unavoidable collision course- not primarily with the poor (who are weak and defenceless) but with other rich people" (Schumacher 1973: 18-19). Thus, "given unlimited desires, even the greatest production cannot keep pace with everybody's fantasy of having more than their neighbors. Necessarily, those who are stronger, more clever, or more favored by other circumstances will try to establish a favored position for themselves and try to take advantage of those who are less powerful, either by force and violence or by suggestion... (Conflict in the society) cannot disappear as long as greed dominates the human heart" (Fromm 1976: 114). Buddhism, even though speaking in atheistic and secular terms, aims at the liberation of human beings from egoism and greed as they are the main cause of misery and harm. There is no doubt that environmental disaster is to a great extent due to the insatiable greed of humans. Buddhism on the whole, though does not mind wealth and prosperity, but they have to be acquired and used in full accord with the ethical norms. Human tendency *to have*- to possess- which the Buddha called craving (*taṇhā*), is the basis of present profit-driven global economy fostering greed. As compared to this, Buddhist economy would base itself on what Fromm called '*to be*'- to share, to give, to sacrifice (Fromm 1976: 105-106).

Profitability can never be the sole Criterion in Buddhist Economics: In the present profit-driven global economic system anything that is 'uneconomic' is sought to be obliterated out of existence. "Call a thing immoral or ugly, soul-destroying or a degradation of man, a peril to the peace of the world or to the well-being of future generations; as long as you have not shown it to be "uneconomic" you have not really questioned its right to exist, grow, and prosper"

(Schumacher 1973: 27). However, in Buddhist view of things, profitability alone cannot be an adequate measure of whether something is “economic” or not. Buddhist economics would take into account not only the profitability of a given activity, but also its effect upon people and environment, including the resource base. The higher animals have an economic value because of their utility, but they are not a meta-economic value in themselves. “If I have a car, a man-made thing, I might quite legitimately argue that the best way to use it is never to bother about maintenance and simply run it to ruin. I may indeed have calculated that this is the most economical method of use. If the calculation is correct, nobody can criticise me for acting accordingly, for there is nothing sacred about a man-made thing like a car. But if I have an animal-be it only a calf-or a hen-a living, sensitive creature, am I allowed to treat it as nothing but a utility? Am I allowed to run it to ruin? It is no use trying to answer such questions scientifically. They are metaphysical, not scientific, questions. It is metaphysical error, likely to produce the gravest practical consequences, to equate “car” and “animal” on account of their utility, while failing to recognize the most fundamental difference between them, that of “level of being” (Schumacher 1973: 84-85).

Buddhist Economics emulates Voluntary Simplicity, Contentment, Liberality, and Generosity: By pointing out that the vulgar chase of luxury and abundance is the root-cause of suffering, Buddhism encourages restraint, voluntary simplicity, and contentment. “The cultivation and expansion of needs is the antithesis of wisdom. It is also the antithesis of freedom and peace. Every increase of needs tends to increase one’s dependence on outside forces over which one cannot have control, and therefore increases existential fear. Only by a reduction of needs can one promote a genuine reduction in those tensions which are the ultimate causes of strife and war” (Schumacher 1973: 20). Thus, Buddhist economics based on ideals such as being content with little, avoiding wastefulness, voluntary simplicity i.e., fewness of desires (*appicchatā*), and contentment (*santuṭṭhi*) aspires to pave the road to peace and happiness. Contentment is the mental condition of a person who is satisfied with what he has or the position in which he finds himself (*santussamāno itarītarena: Sutta-Nipāta.v.42*).

The question arises as to how can a person remain content in the midst of so many economic difficulties. From the Buddhist point of view, economic and moral issues cannot be separated from each other. From the Buddhist point of view mere satisfaction of economic needs without spiritual development can never lead to contentedness among people. Just as poverty is the cause of much crime, wealth too is responsible for various human ills. In the consumer society wealth is merely seen from a materialistic point of view. The result of such an attitude is that its possessor is never satisfied and does not have the correct attitude towards it. However correct attitude towards wealth from the Buddhist point of view is very important because it views material wealth as only required to meet bare necessities. Moreover, wealth must be earned only through righteous and moral mean.

Generosity (*dāna*) and liberality (*cāga*) are always linked in Buddhism with virtue. Moreover, by doing so one gets rid of selfishness and becomes more unacceptable to others because “one who gives makes many friends” (*Sutta-Nipāta.187*). It is not necessary to have much to practice generosity because giving from one’s meager resources is also considered very valuable (*Samyutta Nikāya.I.18; Dhammapada.224*). Generosity is one of the important qualities that make one a gentleman (*Aṅguttara Nikāya.IV.218*). The Buddha compares the man who righteously earns his wealth and shares it with the needy to a man who has both eyes, whereas the one who only earns wealth but does no merit is like a one-eyed man (*Aṅguttara Nikāya .I.129-130*). To build up a healthy society, therefore, liberality and generosity have greatly to be encouraged.

Buddhist Economics aims at Localization and Decentralization: As pointed out by Schumacher, “(f)rom the point of view of Buddhist economics... production from local resources

for local needs is the most rational way of economic life... the modern economist... tends to take statistics showing an increase in the number of ton/miles per head of the population carried by a country's transport system as proof of economic progress, while to the latter- the Buddhist economist- the same statistics would indicate a highly undesirable deterioration in the *pattern of consumption*" (1973: 42).

Buddhist Economics aims at achieving maximum Non-wastefulness and Recycling: The fig-tree glutton (*udumbarakhādika*) method blamed by the Buddha (*Saṃyutta Nikāya*.IV.283), the method of shaking down an indiscriminate amount of fruit from a fig-tree in order to eat a few, is precisely the same as the one employed in drift-net fishing, where many more animals are killed than utilized. Today we understand natural capital as the sum total of renewable and non-renewable resources, including the ecological systems and services that support life. It is different from conventionally defined capital in that natural capital cannot be produced by human activity. What was unimaginable 50 years ago was the speed with which the loss of natural capital would affect humankind. Humanity cannot continue to consume the planet's limited resources at the rate to which it has become accustomed. Such an attitude is bound to have catastrophic consequences. The human economy does not operate in an infinite expanse capable of providing an inexhaustible supply of resources. When the economy expands, it does so by absorbing into itself more and more of the resource base of the extremely fragile and finite ecosystem and by burdening the ecosystem in turn with its waste. But long before the human economy reaches that limit, it will cross a threshold point beyond which the delicate fabric of the ecosystem will be damaged so badly that it shall no longer be capable of sustaining higher forms of life. We may already be very close to that threshold and as human population grows further, the stress on the environment is bound to rise to even more perilous levels.

Buddhist Economics would use Middle-ranged Technologies with a Human Face: Since human beings are social creatures who naturally come together for common ends, this means that a social order guided by Buddhist principles would consist primarily of small-scale communities in which each member can make an effective contribution. Only small-scale social arrangements can rescue people from the portending future disaster. Considered from a Buddhist point of view, the huge polluted mega-cities and uncaring bureaucrats and politicians typical of our age are unsuitable for a proper welfare of sentient beings. The most suitable and compatible economy would be small-scale and localized. Such an economy would use simple technology which would not drain natural resources and in its production would be aimed principally at local consumption, so that there would be direct face-to-face contact between producers and consumers. Large-scale technologies are dehumanizing and morally wrong. Schumacher called for human-scale, decentralized, and appropriate technologies. People can only feel at home in human-scale environments. If economic structures become too large they become impersonal and unresponsive to human needs and aspirations. Under these conditions individuals feel functionally futile, dispossessed, voiceless, powerless, excluded, and alienated. "Wisdom demands a new orientation of science and technology towards the organic, the gentle, the nonviolent, the elegant and beautiful" (Schumacher 1973: 20). Thus, in the Buddhist concept of economic development, we should avoid gigantism, especially of machines, which tend to control rather than serve human beings. If bigness and greed can be avoided, the Middle Path of Buddhist development can be achieved, i.e., both the world of industry and agriculture can be converted into a meaningful habitat. "Some in the industrial countries have learned at first that material prosperity without spiritual development is ultimately unsatisfying" (Anonymous 1983: 18). "Strange to say, technology, although of course the product of man, tends to develop by its own laws and principles, and these are very different from those of human nature or of living nature in general. Nature always, so to speak, knows where and when to stop. Greater even than the mystery of

natural growth is the mystery of the natural cessation of growth. There is measure in all natural things- in their size, speed, or violence. As a result, the system of nature, of which man is a part, tends to be self-balancing, self-adjusting, self-cleansing. Not so with technology... (which) recognises no self-limiting principle- in terms, for instance, of size, speed, or violence. It therefore does not possess the virtues of being self-balancing, self-adjusting, and self-cleansing” (Schumacher 1973: 120). Our economy is already big enough and our technologies too smart and too powerful. What we need most of all is streamlining and downsizing: cutting down on weapons production, on industries dedicated to wasteful luxuries, on conspicuous consumption as the engine that drives the economy. Instead we need qualitative improvements to make our technologies more humble and humane, more benign towards the total biosphere.

Buddhist Economics lays emphasis on Economic Justice, Social Equity, and Right Livelihood: Economic justice and social equity are essential so that no one is deprived of a fair standard of living. As Schumacher said the problem children of the world are the rich societies and not the poor (1973: 126). “To live *peacefully*, we must live with a reasonable degree of *equity*, or fairness, for it is unrealistic to think that, in a communications-rich world, a billion or more persons will accept living in absolute poverty while another billion live in conspicuous excess. Only with greater fairness in the consumption of the world’s resources can we live peacefully, and thereby live sustainably, as a human family” (Elgin 1993: 42). Well-documented scientific studies have now clearly established that each living creature has its place in the biosphere, whereby it plays its unique role is part of the collective balance. The egalitarianism of rights to life is therefore based on scientific realities such as the unity of the living world, its vast diversity (a key factor in evolution) and the complementary nature of its different components. The right to have humanizing work that is dignified and meaningful- right livelihood (*Sammā-ājīva*) as it is known in Buddhism. “The study of Buddhist economics could be recommended even for those who believe that economic growth is more important than any spiritual or religious values... It is a question of finding the right path of development, the Middle Way between materialist heedlessness and traditionalist immobility, in short, of finding “Right Livelihood” (Schumacher 1973: 45). The righteous householder aims at harmonious living (*dhammacariya, samacariya*) (*Majjhima Nikāya*.I.289; *Saṃyutta Nikāya*.I.101) and compassion (*karuṇā*) which is “the desire to remove what is detrimental to others and their unhappiness” (*Sutta-Nipāta*.v.73). This is the concept of the well-adjusted and balanced person, who while he seeks pleasure, exercises a degree of restraint and limits his needs and avoids greed (*visamalobha*) (*Dīgha Nikāya*.III.70).

Buddhist Economics would have Reverent Attitude towards Nature: The Buddhist values mean that environment should not be over exploited. As the Tibetans say very wisely that not too much of anything that is precious should be taken from the earth, as then its quality fades and the earth is destroyed (Morgan & Lawton 1996: 93). The Buddhist ideal, in fact, is co-operation with nature, not domination. As pointed out by E.F. Schumacher, the world is ruled from towns where the feeling of belonging to an ecosystem is not realised. This results in a harsh and improvident treatment of things upon which we ultimately depend, such as water and trees. Moreover, modern economics does not distinguish between renewable and non-renewable materials, as its very method is to equalise and quantify everything by means of a money price. The cheapest is automatically the one to be preferred, as to do otherwise would be irrational and ‘uneconomic.’ From a Buddhist point of view “non-renewable goods must be used only if they are indispensable, and then only with the greatest care and the most meticulous concern for conservation. To use them heedlessly or extravagantly is an act of violence... The Buddhist economist would insist that a population basing its economic life on non-renewable fuels is living parasitically” (Schumacher 1973: 43-44). Thus, a new relation must be established between people and nature, one of cooperation not of exploitation. Buddhism enjoins a respectful and non-violent

attitude towards ecology. “Every follower of the Buddha ought to plant a tree every few years and look after it until it is safely established, and the Buddhist economist can demonstrate without difficulty that the universal observation of this rule would result in a high rate of genuine economic development independent of any foreign aid” (Schumacher 1973: 43).

People and not Goods that Matter in Buddhist Economics: Pollution and accumulation of large amounts of highly toxic substances is an important feature of the emerging global economy. However, as pointed out by Schumacher, this is an ethical, spiritual, and metaphysical monstrosity which “means conducting the economic affairs of man as if people really did not matter at all” (1973: 119). “An entirely new system of thought is needed, a system based on attention to people, and not primarily attention to goods- (the goods will look after themselves!). It could be summed up in the phrase, “production by the masses, rather than mass production.” What was impossible, however, in the nineteenth century, is possible now. And what was in fact- if not necessarily at least understandably- neglected in the nineteenth century is unbelievably urgent now. That is, the conscious utilisation of enormous technological and scientific potential for the fight against misery and human degradation- a fight in intimate contact with actual people, with individuals, families, small groups, rather than states and other anonymous abstractions” (Schumacher 1973: 56).

Instead of Indulging in Mass-production, Buddhist Economics would produce for the Masses: The driving force of such an economy would be the promotion of well-being both material and social, not commercial profit and unrestrained expansion. As pointed out by Fromm, the development of profit-oriented “economic system was no longer determined by the question: *What is good for Man?* But by the question: *What is good for the growth of the system?* One tried to hide the sharpness of this conflict by making the assumption that what was good for the growth of the system (or even for a single big corporation) was also good for the people. This construction was bolstered by an auxiliary construction: that the very qualities that the system required of human beings- egotism, selfishness, and greed- were innate in human nature; hence, not only the system but human nature itself fostered them. Societies in which egotism, selfishness, and greed did not exist were supposed to be “primitive,” their inhabitants “childlike.” People refused to recognize that these traits were not natural drives that caused industrial society to exist, but that they were the *products* of social circumstances” (Fromm 1976: 7-8). “The technology of *mass production* is inherently violent, ecologically damaging, self-defeating in terms of non-renewable resources, and stultifying for the human person. The technology of *production by the masses*, making use of the best of modern knowledge and experience, is conducive to decentralisation, compatible with the laws of ecology, gentle in its use of scarce resources, and designed to serve the human person instead of making him the servant of machines” (Schumacher 1973: 126).

Buddhist Economics would Shift the Emphasis from Material to Spiritual Needs: We are trying to satisfy nonmaterial needs with material goods. For Buddhism material satisfaction merely provides a starting point for the pursuit of higher goals. The Buddha called upon people to wake up and liberate themselves from the illusion that craving for things leads to happiness. It is not cleverness but wisdom which can “enable us to see the hollowness and fundamental unsatisfactoriness of a life devoted primarily to the pursuit of material ends, to the neglect of the spiritual. Such a life necessarily sets man against man and nation against nation, because man’s needs are infinite and infinitude can be achieved only in the spiritual realm, never in the material. Man assuredly needs to rise above this humdrum “world”; wisdom shows him the way to do it; without wisdom, he is driven to build up a monster economy, which destroys the world, and to seek fantastic satisfactions, like landing a man on the moon. Instead of overcoming the “world” by moving towards saintliness, he tries to overcome it by gaining preeminence in wealth, power, science, or indeed any imaginable “sport”” (Schumacher 1973: 24). Spiritual health and material

well-being are not enemies: they are natural allies. A Buddhist approach to economics would distinguish between misery, sufficiency, and glut. Economic growth would be good only to the point of sufficiency. Limitless growth and consumption would be disastrous. Further, whereas Buddhist economics would be based squarely on renewable resources, modern economics is based on the ruthless exploitation of nonrenewable resources and recognizes no limits to production and consumption- a non-sustainable system. "Economics without Buddhism, i.e., without spiritual, human, and ecological values, is like sex without love... While the materialist is mainly interested in goods, the Buddhist is mainly interested in liberation. But Buddhism is "the Middle Way" and therefore in no way antagonistic to physical well-being. It is not wealth that stands in the way of liberation but the attachment to wealth; not the enjoyment of pleasurable things but the craving for them... From an economist's point of view, the marvel of the Buddhist way of life is the utter rationality of its pattern- amazingly small means leading to extraordinarily satisfactory results... For the modern economist this is very difficult to understand. He is used to measuring the "standard of living" by the amount of annual consumption, assuming all the time that a man who consumes more is "better off" than a man who consumes less. A Buddhist economist would consider this approach excessively irrational: since consumption is merely a means to human well-being, the aim should be to obtain the maximum of well-being with the minimum of consumption... The ownership and the consumption of goods is a means to an end, and a Buddhist economics is the systematic study of how to attain given ends with the minimum means" (Schumacher 1973: 38-41).

Buddhist Economics would be directed towards Purification of Human Character: Buddhist economics is very different from the economics of modern materialism, "since the Buddhist sees the essence of civilisation not in a multiplication of wants but in the purification of human character. Character, at the same time, is formed primarily by a man's work... properly conducted in conditions of human dignity and freedom" (Schumacher 1973: 39). It is unBuddhistic to consider goods as more important than people and consumption as more important than creative activity. Such an aim was made explicit in the Green Buddhist Declaration, prepared by members of the international Buddhist community for discussion at the World Fellowship of Buddhism in Colombo (1980): "We believe that since world resources and the ecosystem cannot support all peoples at the level of the consumption of the advantaged nations, efforts towards global equity must be coupled with efforts towards voluntary simplicity, in one's individual life-style and through democratically-determined policies. The economic structures which encourage consumeristic greed and alienation must be transformed." Unfortunately, in present-day globalizing world, moral sentiments are viewed as irrelevant to business and economics. Business principles are taken to be essentially restricted to profit maximization. Moreover, as pointed out by Amartya Sen, "a departure from profit maximization need not necessarily be benign, nor need moral sentiments be invariably noble. Some of the worst barbarities in the contemporary world have been committed by self-sacrificing racists- ready to do harm to some people even at great cost or risk to themselves. Indeed, this process continues today with relentless persistence... The rejection of a self-centered life can go with the attempted advancement- sometimes violent promotion- of the perceived interests only of a particular group or community (excluding others), and even with wilfully inflicting damages on another group or community" (Sen 1997: 6). This is where Buddhism and the value-system proposed by it become important.

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