

# The Greatest Wealth is contentment

## A Buddhist Perspective on Poverty

### David R. Loy

Does Buddhism have anything special to contribute to our understanding of poverty? Like other religions, Buddhism is sometimes criticized for encouraging a non-materialistic way of life that goes against the grain of our main desires and motivations. If we want to reduce poverty, we are referred instead to the science of economics, which has discovered the laws of economic growth that promote worldly well-being. In fact, the opposite is more true. Contemporary economics is much more "idealistic" in that economists tend to live in an one-dimensional world of statistics and equations that do not accurately reflect human values and aspirations in the world we actually live in. In contrast to the calculating individualism that neo-liberal economics presupposes, Buddhism is more down-to-earth in its understanding of the sources of human ill-being and well-being. Its approach is also more similar to the way most pre-modern communities have understood well-being, and "undeveloped" societies today still do. This article considers the implications of Buddhist teachings for their economic development.

Far from ignoring or minimizing poverty, Buddhist teachings are sensitive to it, offering both diagnosis and remedies. The most important thing, however, is that Buddhism challenges our usual understanding of poverty by contextualizing the problem in a different way, which questions the assumptions that still dominate our thinking about "undeveloped" societies.

According to Buddhism poverty is bad because it involves *dukkha*, best translated as "ill-

being" in this context. The goal of the Buddhist path is to end our *dukkha*, and that does not imply any significant distinction between worldly *dukkha* and some other spiritual type. So Buddhism does not and cannot value poverty that is a source of *dukkha*. Poverty means lacking the basic material requirements for leading a decent life free from hunger, exposure and disease. The basic needs of a monastic provide a useful benchmark: food sufficient to alleviate hunger and maintain one's health, clothing sufficient to be socially decent and to protect the body, shelter sufficient for serious engagement with cultivating the mind, and health care sufficient to cure and prevent disease. People who voluntarily renounce worldly possessions and pleasures in favor of a life of such minimal needs belong to the community of "noble ones" (*ariyapuggala*).

There is a causal relationship between material poverty and social deterioration, according to the *Lion's Roar Sutra*. It tells the story of a monarch who at first relied upon the Buddhist teachings but later began to rule according to his own ideas. He did not give property to the needy, with the result that poverty became widespread. Due to poverty one man took what was not given and was arrested; when the king asked him why, the man said he had nothing to live on. So the king gave him some property, saying that it would be enough to carry on a business and support his family.

Exactly the same thing happened to another man, and when other people heard about this they too decided to steal so they would be treated in a similar way. Then the king realized that if he continued to give property to such men, theft would continue to increase. So he decided to get tough on the next thief: "I had better make an end of him, finish him off once for all, and cut his head off." And he did.

At this point in the story, one might expect a moralistic parable about the importance of deterring crime, but it turns in the opposite direction:

Hearing about this, people thought: "Now let us get sharp swords made for us, and then we can take from anybody what is not given, we will make an end of them, finish them off once and for all and cut off their heads." So, having procured some sharp swords, they launched murderous assaults on villages, towns and cities, and went in for highway robbery, killing their victims by cutting off their heads.

Thus, from the not giving of property to the needy, poverty became widespread, from the growth of poverty, the taking of what was not given increased, from the increase of theft,

the use of weapons increased, from the increased use of weapons, the taking of life increased . . . (*Digha-Nikaya* iii 65)

According to this myth, poverty is a root cause of theft, violence, falsehood, etc. The Buddhist solution has nothing to do with accepting our (or others') "poverty karma." The problem begins when the king does not give property to the needy — in modern terms, when the state neglects its responsibility to maintain a minimum of what we call distributive justice. Social breakdown cannot be separated from broader questions about the benevolence of the social order. The solution to poverty-induced crime is not to punish severely but to enable people to provide for their basic needs.

In other sutras, however, the Buddha teaches that the greatest wealth is contentment (*santutthi paramam dhanam*). Buddhism draws attention to the fact that the single-minded pursuit of material wealth cannot make human beings happy. According to the second of the four noble truths, the cause of *dukkha* is *tanha* "craving." When human beings gain an intense acquisitive drive for some object, that object becomes a cause of suffering. Such objects are compared to the flame of a torch carried against the wind, or to a burning pit of embers: they involve much anxiety but very little satisfaction.

Proliferation of unnecessary wants is the basic cause of unnecessary ill-being.

Development projects that seek to end poverty by "developing" a society into an economy focused on consumption are therefore grasping the snake by the wrong end. As Gandhi put it, the earth has enough for everyone's needs, but not for anyone's greed.

Is this image of our human nature and its potential too idealistic? In fact, this approach reflects better than economic theory the attitudes of most non-modern societies.

According to my favorite definition, by Thich Nhat Hanh, Buddhism is "a clever way to enjoy your life." Confusing the quality of one's life with a quantitative "standard of living" is, in contrast, a self-defeating way, because it does not lead to happiness (*sukha*).

Many of the Third World peoples we have been so eager to "develop" are more aware of the difference than we are. In most traditional societies, income is not the primary criterion of well-being; sometimes it is not even a major one. When Robert Chambers asked a master builder in a Bulgarian community to rank people according to wealth, he "*spontaneously enlarged the list of wellbeing criteria emphasizing the importance of children's education, good health and a good humoured nature.... Interestingly, the less*

*well-off group included the most wealthy person in the village — an unhappy, bad tempered fellow put at the bottom of the pile along with the drunks and the sick." From his study of the relevant literature Chambers concluded: "Income, the reductionist criterion of normal economists, has never, in my experience or in the evidence I have been able to review, been given explicit primacy."*

Our own obsession with economic growth seems natural to us because we have forgotten the historicity of the "needs" we now take for granted. That includes a monetary income in Western societies now thoroughly monetarized and commodified, where almost anything can be converted into anything else through a common medium of exchange. Since our needs (or rather our wants) are now taken for granted as defining our common humanity as much as universal human rights do, we are encouraged to forget what for Buddhism is an essential human attribute if we are to be happy: the need for self-limitation.

Any formulation of "needs" is as much a value judgement as a determination of fact. According to Buddhism, the fundamental human problem is not the technological and economic issue of meeting all our material wants — something psychologically as well as ecologically impossible — but the psychological and spiritual task of understanding the nature of our own minds. Without having been seduced by the utopian dream of a technological cornucopia, it would never occur to most "poor" people to become fixated on fantasies about all the things they might have. For them, their ends are an expression of the means available to them. We are often imposing our own value judgements when we insist on seeing them as poor. It is presumptuous to assume that they must be unhappy, and that the only way to become happy is to start on the treadmill of a lifestyle dependent on the market and increasingly preoccupied with consumption.

An alternative example of indigenous, self-governing economic development is the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement, inspired by Buddhist and Gandhian principles, which is active in almost half the villages in Sri Lanka. Originally founded in 1957, it involves helping local communities decide for themselves what they would like to be done, and usually leads to the development of a village council, followed by setting up a local school, clinic, and bank, as well as family programs and economic initiatives. Emphasis is on the development of community: "we build the road and the road builds us."

According to Sarvodaya's own estimates, over eleven million people have benefited from these programs.

More recently, the Buddhist kingdom of Bhutan, one of the "poorest" countries in Asia, has been at the forefront of efforts to develop a new index for measuring human well-being: "gross national happiness."

Why do we assume that "income/consumption poverty" is the same as ill-being? That brings us to the heart of the matter. Material well-being has become increasingly important because of our loss of faith in any other possibility of fulfilment — for example, an afterlife in heaven with God, or the secular heaven of socialism, or even (when despairing over the ecological crisis) the future progress of humankind. Increasing our "standard of living" has become so compulsive for us because it serves as a substitute for traditional religious values — or, more precisely, because it has actually become a kind of secular religion for us.

If so, our evangelical efforts to economically "develop" other societies, which cherish their own spiritual values and community traditions, may be viewed as a contemporary form of religious imperialism. Does that make the globalization of capitalism a new kind of mission to convert the heathen?

The moral role of religions is difficult for many economists to accept, since their discipline is a legacy of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment project that contrasted scientific and social progress with the regressive weight of privileged churches. Today, however, we must recognize that the neo-liberal economic understanding of what happiness is, and how that is to be achieved, is only one vision among many. Like every other perspective, it has its advantages and disadvantages, and should not be imposed on others who have their own worldviews and values.

All societies are confronted with the same basic tragedy of life, which in Buddhist terms is suffering, old age, and death. Historically, the main human response to this has been religion, which addresses it in various ways. From a perspective informed by the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, these responses are superstitious and escapist. From a Buddhist perspective, however, economic growth and consumerism are unsatisfactory alternatives because they are evasions, which repress the basic problem of life by distracting us with symbolic substitutes such as money, status, and power. Similar

critiques of idolatry are explicit or implicit in all the great religions, and rampant economic globalization makes that message all the more important for our time. It is important for religious institutions to understand that market emphasis on commodity accumulation and consumption undermines their most important teachings. The corrosive influence of economic globalization and its development institutions on other human values needs to be challenged. Today the mainstream media – our international nervous system – are mostly corporations interested only in the bottom line, and our universities are becoming little more than an advanced form of job training. Do revived religions remain our best hope that the commodifications of globalization will be challenged?

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