

## **The Practice of Generosity by Stephen Batchelor**

**BUDDHISM RECOGNISES THAT a life committed to the ending of suffering involves far more than just personal transformation through silent contemplation.** Although such contemplation may be the pre-eminent value in a Buddhist life, the Buddha understood that to be meaningful, even possible, it requires a philosophical and ethical context. And as part of this ethical context, he spoke of “Right Livelihood.”

Traditionally, right livelihood has been explained as avoiding those kinds of work that evidently entail harm being caused to oneself and others: working as a slaughterer, an arms-manufacturer, a publican, a dealer in poisons or a trader in human life. Today, however, as we live and work in a world of far greater complexity, where the apparently simple acts of buying and selling have repercussions on people’s lives around the world, the ethics of right livelihood must be accordingly re-evaluated. The implications of even driving a car or drinking a cup of coffee have social, environmental and economic consequences far beyond the limits of our immediate experience, which we are morally obliged to take into account. From this perspective, inner spiritual transformation is just as dependent upon the effect of our economic life upon the world as transformations in the world are dependent upon spiritual re-orientation.

Buddhism holds that economic behaviour is a manifestation of social attitudes, and these in turn reflect social values. The ideal social values are the four qualities termed brahma-vihara, the “sublime states” of:

- (1) loving-kindness, the wish for the welfare and happiness of others;
- (2) compassion, empathy with those afflicted with suffering;
- (3) sympathetic joy, rejoicing in the success and happiness of others; and
- (4) equanimity, the capacity to regard all beings equally, free from favouritism and bias. Although originally taught as exercises in meditation, they can also be viewed as positing the ideal relationships which the individual should establish with his or her fellows in society. As applied to economics, they imply an order where competition and exploitation are replaced by cooperation in the pursuit of shared goals and the alleviation of misery.

The Buddha himself did not speak at length about the actual tasks of social change or economic reform. On many occasions, however, the Pali Canon – the earliest record of the Buddha’s teaching – records his giving advice about how to conduct one’s economic relationships in a way that accorded with the Dharma. He said that in his or her work, a Buddhist should be energetic, industrious, diligent, skilful, proficient and prudent. People should protect their earnings, keep good company and live within their means. Wealth, he taught, provided that it is lawfully obtained, brings four kinds of happiness: economic security, having enough to spend generously on oneself and others; the peace of mind that accompanies freedom from debt; and the leading of a blameless life. Meeting one’s material responsibilities to family, friends and employees is emphasised. Instead of squandering or hoarding wealth, a quarter should be used for consumption, a quarter saved for an emergency, and a half used for one’s business – a very high rate of re-investment if taken literally. From such examples, it is clear that Buddhist ethics are not antagonistic to the development of

material prosperity.

Right Livelihood is as much concerned with the spirit in which work is done as with the economic results of the work. Such livelihood would seek to create an atmosphere in the work-place of kindness and co-operation, mindfulness and generosity, where not only the workers' material requirements are catered for but also their spiritual needs. The quality of work should reflect the spirit in which it is done. The challenge, especially in a competitive, free-market economy, is to find a balance between making enough to live on and sustaining a workplace that is spiritually nourishing. An example in Britain of businesses that seek to achieve these goals are found in the "Right Livelihood Co-operatives" of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order.

### **Economics**

**THE KEY TO UNDERSTANDING economic activity from a Buddhist perspective is the recognition of the interrelatedness of all things, traditionally expressed through the doctrine of "Co-dependent Emergence" (*pratityasamutpada*).** Suffering comes about both through the individual and collective failure to understand this fact and the construction of a distorted sense of reality which assumes that living beings and things are intrinsically unrelated. The frequently misunderstood doctrines of "non-self" and "emptiness" are pointing not to some transcendent void, entirely disconnected to the concerns of the world, but to the absence of a fictitious world of discrete, reified entities.

The concept of emptiness (*sunyata*) is a means to realise that one's limited ego is not the inescapable centre of the world in constant battle with other egos competing for the same impossible preeminence, but part of a network of relationships upon which it depends for its own unique identity. The ethical implications of emptiness likewise do not lead to world-denial but to compassionate participation in the plight of others, with whom one empathetically recognises a shared destiny.

Buddhism invites us to consider its claim that acquisitiveness originates as much in the root insecurity and anxiety of the human being as it does in physical needs. This is amply illustrated both by the conspicuous consumption throughout history of wealthy, privileged yet nonetheless discontented minorities, as well as by the compulsive behaviour found in our present affluent societies.

The habit of acquisitiveness is sustained by delusion: psychological entrapment in the fantasy of lasting happiness being achievable through the acquisition of material goods, money, status etc. The impossibility of unlimited acquisitive growth in a world of finite resources is unlikely ever to be accepted by people still attached to the illusion that final happiness is found through compulsive acquisition – precisely the illusion fostered by the powerful worldwide advertising industry.

Whether Buddhists see the need for a specifically Buddhist economic theory depends on a clear understanding not only of Buddhism but of economic theory itself. One view is that mainstream economic theory is in itself "value free" and able to incorporate and reflect any system of values, including a Buddhist one. An alternative view is that mainstream economic theory is inherently unable to reflect adequately the Buddhist "practice of generosity," for instance, as part of economic activity.

Buddhism emphasises the need to relate all human activity, including labour, to a daily practice which can

enable individuals to understand their interrelatedness with every manifestation of the conditions around them and hence to find contentment at truer level of experience. This practice is an on-going challenge to greed, hatred, and delusion since such traits of mind preclude a recognition of the interconnectedness of all life by reinforcing the individual's sense of isolation. The resultant view of life leads to a diminution of personal wants and to a higher valuation of simplicity for its own sake.

Given its view of the power of delusion and greed to dominate and corrupt the human mind, Buddhism is certainly not optimistic about a sane ordering of the world and has for the most part resisted positing a Utopian vision. Traditionally, this view has led to a reluctance by Buddhists to involve themselves too closely with social and political change. But now it is simply a question of trying to save the world from the disastrous consequences of delusion and greed run amok. Today Buddhism is presented with the challenge to make its wisdom accessible for the world as a whole.

In his book *Small is Beautiful* the economist E.F. Schumacher included a chapter on Buddhist Economics which he concluded with the words: "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." Such an approach is associated with the emergence in recent decades, both in Asia and the West, of an eco-socially engaged Buddhism, which seeks to combine the work of transforming social structures and processes with the ancient practices of mindfulness and meditation, in a single mutually supportive spiritual practice. It seeks, for example, to combine the wisdom of personal insight into our restless acquisitive itch with a compassionate nonviolent social activism aimed at transforming the institutions of delusion and acquisitiveness.

### **Uncertainty, Ambiguity and Humility**

IT WOULD BE ARROGANT to claim that the views expressed here would be shared by all people who call themselves Buddhists. For Buddhism is a rich and diverse set of traditions, between which there have existed and continue to exist a wide range of tensions. There are many Buddhists who would place primary emphasis on the value of adhering to time-honoured traditions of doctrinal interpretation and spiritual practice, while others would lay greater stress on the need to reinterpret and modify traditional thought and practice to make the Dharma more accessible to the modern world. Yet most would agree that Buddhism is more of a practice than a creed, a way of life which emphasises the possibility of spiritual experience rather than dogmatic adherence to the letter of sacred texts.

Buddhists are fully aware of how grandiose solutions to the world's problems fail to appreciate the complexity of concrete situations, which by their nature are rooted in a network of relationships that the unenlightened mind only dimly perceives. Yet through their practice of ethics, meditation and wisdom, Buddhists also understand that generosity is not an option but an imperative. How they will express their generosity, as the world shifts and changes in the flux of time, remains to be seen.

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