

PAVE THE PLANET OR WEAR SHOES? A BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE ON GREED AND GLOBALIZATION

By David R. Loy

ABSTRACT

The goal of the Buddhist path is to end our dissatisfaction with life by "waking up." This does not mean giving up material possessions, but it requires a non-attached attitude toward them. *Dana* ("generosity") is very important as a way of developing our non-attachment as well as helping others. Buddhism does not recommend any particular economic system, although it does emphasize that economic issues are also ethical or spiritual ones. The crucial question is whether an economic system is conducive to the ethical and spiritual development of its members. Does it institutionalize the "three poisons" (greed, ill will, delusion), or does it encourage us to transform them into generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom? The "engine" of economic globalization is the desire for continual profits and the need to keep people always wanting more; ironically, this does not seem to be making us any happier. Economic theory assumes that resources are limited, but our desires are infinitely expandable. Without self-limitation, this is a formula for strife, since frustrated desires are a major cause of ill will. From a Buddhist perspective capitalism is neither natural nor inevitable, but one historically conditioned way of living that tends to desecralize the earth by commodifying it into resources.

BUDDHIST TEACHINGS ON WEALTH AND POVERTY

Why is Buddhism known as the Middle Way? Shakyamuni Buddha renounced a privileged life of pleasure and leisure for the arduous life of a forest dweller, but ascetic practices did not produce the enlightenment he sought. The middle way he discovered does not simply split the difference between sense-enjoyment and sense-denial. It focuses on calming and understanding the mind, for such insight is what can liberate us from our usual preoccupation with trying to become happy by satisfying our cravings. The goal is not to eradicate all desires, but to experience them in a non-attached way, so we are not controlled by them. Contrary to

BUDDHISM

the stereotype of Buddhism as a world-denying religion, that goal does not necessarily involve transcending this world in order to experience some other one. It means attaining a wisdom that realizes the true nature of this world, including the true nature of oneself.¹

These concerns are reflected in the Buddhist attitude toward wealth and poverty:

To know the *dhamma*, to see things truly, is to recognize the self as a conditioned, temporal reality and to reject self-indulgent cravings as harmful illusions. Thus, a non-attached orientation toward life does not require a flat renunciation of all material possessions. Rather, it specifies an attitude to be cultivated and expressed in whatever material condition one finds oneself. To be non-attached is to possess and use material things but not to be possessed or used by them. Therefore, the idea of non-attachment applies all across Buddhist society, to laymen and monk alike. (Size-more and Swearer 1990, 2).

The main issue is not how poor or wealthy we are, but how we respond to our situation. The wisdom that develops naturally from non-attachment is knowing how to be content with what we have. *Sanutthi paramam dhanam*, "the greatest wealth is contentment" (*Dhammapada* 204).

This does not mean that Buddhism encourages poverty or denigrates wealth. As Shakyamuni emphasized many times, the goal of the Buddhist path is to end our *dukkha* (often translated as

¹ As it has spread and adapted to different cultures, Buddhism has changed so much that it is difficult to generalize about its teachings. In this short essay, however, there is no space to distinguish between the different Buddhist traditions. My focus is on the teachings of Shakyamuni as preserved in the Theravada Buddhism of South and Southeast Asia. The Pali suttas, which are believed to record his original teachings, provide a foundation generally accepted by all Buddhist traditions. The Nikayas cited in my text are an important part of those teachings. The *Dhammapada* is a very popular collection of Buddhist aphorisms taken from the Pali canon. In a few places I refer to the teachings of Mahayana Buddhism, which today are found predominantly in North and East Asia.

"suffering" but better understood as "ill-being" or "dissatisfaction"). He summarized his teachings into four noble (or ennobling) truths: life is *dukkha*; the cause of *dukkha* is *tanha*, "craving"; there is an end to *dukkha* (*nirvana*); the way to end *dukkha* is to follow *magga*, "the eightfold path." None of these truths implies material poverty, for poverty is a source of unhappiness in itself and also makes it more difficult to follow a spiritual path.² In the *Anguttara Nikaya*, for example, the Buddha says that a life of poverty (*daliddiya*) is miserable, because it leads to (among other things) borrowing, mounting debts, and ever-increasing suffering (III, 350-52).

Shakyamuni also said that there are three types of people in the world. Some are blind in both eyes, because they know neither how to be successful in the world nor how to live a virtuous life; some are blind in one eye, because they know how to pursue worldly success but do not know how to live virtuously; and a few are not blind at all, because they know how to do both (*Anguttara Nikaya* I, 128). As this implies, Buddhism recommends neither material nor moral deprivation.

Nevertheless, it would be a big mistake to conclude that Buddhism approves of a life devoted to acquiring wealth. The ultimate goal of liberating insight may be more difficult to pursue if we are destitute, but a life focused on money may be as bad, or worse. Shakyamuni warned repeatedly against that danger: "Those people who, having obtained vast wealth, are not intoxicated by it, are not led into heedlessness and reckless indulgence which endangers others, are very rare in this world" (*Samyutta Nikaya* I, 74). An intense drive to acquire material riches is one of the main causes of our *dukkha*. It involves much anxiety but very little real satisfaction.

Instead, the Buddha praised those who renounce all attachment to material things in favor of a life devoted wholeheartedly to the path of liberation, by joining the *sangha* community of *bhikkhu* monks and *bhikkhuni* nuns. The minimal needs of such renunciates are known as the four requisites: food sufficient to alleviate hunger and maintain one's health, clothing sufficient to

² For example, see the story of the poor peasant in *Digha Nikaya* III, 189-92.

be socially decent and protect the body, shelter sufficient for cultivating the mind, and health care sufficient to cure and prevent illness. Needless to say, this is hardly a recommendation of wealth.

On the other side, however, and despite all the counsel about not being attached to riches, Buddhism does not claim that wealth is in itself an obstacle to following the spiritual path. The five basic precepts that all Buddhists are expected to follow—to avoid killing, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct, and intoxicating drugs—mention nothing about abstaining from wealth or property, although they do imply much about how we should pursue them. The value of money cannot be compared with the supreme goal of enlightenment, yet wealth properly acquired has traditionally been seen as a sign of virtue, and properly used can be a boon for everyone, because wealth creates opportunities to benefit people and to cultivate non-attachment by developing one's generosity. The problem with wealth is not its possession but its abuse. "Wealth destroys the foolish, though not those who search for the goal" (*Dhammapada* 355). In short, what is blameworthy is to earn wealth improperly, to become attached to it and not to spend it for the well-being of everyone, to squander it foolishly or use it to cause suffering to others.³ Right livelihood, the fifth part of the eightfold path, emphasizes that our work should not harm other living beings and specifically prohibits trading in weapons, poisons, intoxicants, or slaves.

That wealth can indicate virtue follows from the traditional Buddhist belief in karma and rebirth. If karma is an exceptionless law of the universe, what happens to us later (in this life or in a future lifetime) is a result of what we have done in the past and are doing now. This makes one's wealth a consequence of one's own previous generosity, and poverty a result of misbehavior (most likely avarice or seeking wealth in an immoral way). Not all contemporary Buddhists accept that karma is so inexorable, or understand it so literally, but this traditional belief implies our personal responsibility for whatever happens to us and (in the long run, at least) complete harmony between our morality and

³ See, for example, *Anguttara Nikaya* IV, 285 and II, 67-68; *Samyutta Nikaya* I, 90.

our prosperity. Today, however, the effects of economic globalization and a concern for social justice cast a somewhat different light on this issue. We shall return to this later.

BUDDHIST ECONOMICS

Everything mentioned above concerns attitudes that we as individuals should cultivate or avoid. What kind of economic system do they imply? Buddhism, like Christianity, lacks an intrinsic social theory. The Buddha never taught about economics in the sense that we understand it now. This means that we cannot look to traditional Buddhist texts for specific answers to the economic issues that concern us today. However, some Pali suttas do have significant social implications. Perhaps the most important is the Lion's Roar Sutta (*Cakkavatti-sihanada Sutta*), which shows how poverty can lead to social deterioration.

In this sutta the Buddha tells the story of a monarch in the distant past who initially relied upon the Buddhist teachings, doing as his sage advised: "Let no crime prevail in your kingdom, and to those who are in need, give property." Later, however, he began to rule according to his own ideas and did not give property to the needy. As a result, poverty became widespread. Because of poverty, one man took what was not given (i.e., stole) and was arrested. When the king asked him why he stole, the man said he had nothing to live on. So the king gave him enough property to carry on a business and support his family.

Exactly the same thing happened with another poor man, and when other people heard about this they, too, decided to steal so they would be treated in a similar way. This made the king realize that if he continued to give property to thieves, theft would increase. So he decided to get tough on the next one: "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 we might expect a 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

BUDDHISM

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 increased use of weapons, the use of weapons increased, from the increased use of weapons, the taking of life increased. . . . (*Digha-Nikaya* III, 65ff., in *The Long Discourses* 396-405)

The long-term result was degradation of life and social collapse.

Despite some fanciful elements, this myth has clear economic implications. Poverty is presented as a root cause of immoral behavior such as theft and violence. The Buddhist solution to such deprivation is not accepting one's "poverty karma." The problem begins when the king neglects his responsibility to give property to those who need it. This influential sutra implies that social breakdown cannot be separated from broader questions about the benevolence of the social order. The solution to poverty-induced crime is not severe punishment but helping people provide for their basic needs.

However, notice also what the sutra does *not* say. Today we usually evaluate such situations by talking about the need for "social justice" and the state's role in "distributive justice." This emphasis on social justice, so central in the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), is not found in traditional Buddhism. As the above story indicates, this does not mean that Buddhism is insensitive to the problem of poverty, but emphasis on karma implies a different way of understanding and addressing that social problem. The traditional Buddhist solution to poverty is *dana*, "giving" or "generosity."

Dana is the most important concept in Buddhist thinking about society and economics, because it is the main way our non-attachment is cultivated and demonstrated. We are called upon to show compassion to those who need our help. Although the doctrine of karma implies that such unfortunates are reaping the fruit

of their previous deeds, this is not understood in a punitive way. They are simply victims of their own ignorance, and the importance of generosity for those walking the Buddhist path does not permit us to be indifferent to their misfortune. We are expected, even spiritually required, to lend what assistance we can. This appeal is not to justice for a victim of circumstances; it is the morality and spiritual progress of the giver that is the issue. In the language of contemporary ethical theory, this is a "virtue ethics." It offers a different perspective that cuts through the usual political opposition between conservative (right) and liberal (left) economic views. According to Buddhism, no one can evade responsibility for one's own deeds and efforts, but generosity is not optional: we have a *spiritual obligation* to respond compassionately to those in need. In the Lion's Roar Sutra, the king started the social breakdown when he did not fulfill this obligation.

Does this emphasis on *dana* offer a viable alternative to modern discourse about social justice? However valuable individual generosity may be as a personal trait, it is difficult to see how that alone could be an adequate response to the widespread social problems being created by rapid economic globalization. It is also difficult for many Buddhists today to accept that increasing poverty, apparently caused by impersonal economic developments, is really just an effect of individual bad karma created in previous lifetimes. The concept of social justice may not be original to Buddhism but neither is it incompatible with Buddhist teachings. Today some socially engaged Buddhists are attempting to incorporate such a concern for social justice into the way they live their faith.

In modern times, the social consequences of *dana* in most Asian Buddhist countries have become somewhat limited because the popular emphasis has been on “making merit” by supporting the *sangha* community of renunciate monks and nuns. The *sangha* is dependent on that support because monks and nuns are not allowed to work for money. Karma is often understood in a modified way, as something that can be accumulated by *dana*, “giving.” Since the amount of merit gained is believed to depend not only upon the value of the gift but also upon the worthiness

Buddhism

of the recipient, and since members of the Buddhist *sangha* are viewed as the most worthy recipients, one receives more merit from donating food to a well-fed *bhikkhu* than to a poor and hungry layperson.

This preoccupation with accumulating merit (usually for a better rebirth) may be incompatible with the Buddhist emphasis on non-attachment, as it seems to encourage a "spiritual materialism" that is ultimately at odds with the highest goal of spiritual liberation. However, the benefits of such merit-making rebound on the rest of society, since the *sangha* is primarily responsible for practicing and propagating the teachings of Buddhism. Nevertheless, I believe that the present economic relationship between *sangha* and laypeople needs to be re-examined. Rural Thailand, for example, needs hospitals and clinics more than it needs new temples. According to the popular view, however, a wealthy person gains more merit by funding the construction of a temple—whether or not one already exists in that area. Such a narrow but commonplace understanding of *dana* as merit-making has worked well to provide for *sangha* needs, but cannot be an adequate spiritual response to the challenges provided by globalization.

One possible Buddhist alternative, or supplement, is the *bodhisattva* ideal emphasized in Mahayana Buddhism. The bodhisattva is a spiritually advanced person wholly devoted to responding to the needs of all living beings, not just those of the *sangha*. A bodhisattva's entire life is *dana*, not as a way to accumulate merit but because of the bodhisattva's insight that s/he is not separate from others. According to the usual understanding, a bodhisattva does not follow the eightfold path but a slightly different version that emphasizes perfecting six virtues: *dana*, "generosity," *sila*, "morality," *ksanti*, "patience," *virya*, "vigor," *dhyana*, "meditation," and *prajna*, "wisdom." *Dana*, the first virtue, is believed to imply all the others.

Of course, such a religious model is not easily institutionalized. But that is not the main point. Although *dana* cannot substitute for social justice, there is also no substitute for the social practice of *dana* as a fundamental aspect of any healthy society. When those who have much feel no responsibility for those who have nothing, a social crisis is inevitable.

A BUDDHIST VIEW OF GLOBALIZATION

We have already noticed that traditional Buddhist teachings do not include a developed social theory yet do have many important social implications. Those implications can be developed to understand and help us respond to the new world order being created by economic globalization.

The first thing to be noticed is also perhaps the most important: As the parable of the unwise king shows, Buddhism does not separate economic issues from ethical or spiritual ones. The notion that economics is a "social science"—discovering and applying impersonal economic laws—obscures two important truths. First, who gets what, and who does not, always has moral dimensions, so production and distribution of economic goods and services should not be left only to the supposedly objective rules of the marketplace. If some people have much more than they need, and many others have much less than they need, some sort of redistribution is necessary. *Dana* is the traditional Buddhist way of redistributing.

The second important truth is that no economic system is value-free; every system of production and consumption encourages the development of certain values and discourages others. As Phra Payutto, Thailand's most distinguished scholar-monk, puts it:

It may be asked how it is possible for economics to be free of values when, in fact, it is rooted in the human mind. The economic process begins with want, continues with choice, and ends with satisfaction, all of which are functions of the mind. Abstract values are thus the beginning, the middle and the end of economics, and so it is impossible for economics to be value-free. Yet as it stands, many economists avoid any consideration of values, ethics, or mental qualities, despite the fact that these will always have a bearing on economic concerns. (Payutto 1994, 27).

This clarifies the basic Buddhist approach. Individual and social values cannot be delinked. The crucial issue is whether our economic system is conducive to the ethical and spiritual development of its members. When we evaluate an economic system, we

BUDDHISM

should consider not only how efficiently it produces and distributes goods, but also its effects on human values and, through them, its larger social effects. The collective values that our economic system encourages should be consistent with the individual Buddhist values that work to reduce our *dukkha*.

Much of the philosophical reflection on economics has focused on whether economic values are rooted in our basic human nature. Those who defend market capitalism argue that its emphasis on competition and personal gain is grounded in the fact that humans are fundamentally self-centered and self-interested. Critics of capitalism argue that our human nature is less selfish, more cooperative, and generous.

Buddhism avoids that debate by taking a different approach. The Buddha emphasized that we all have both unwholesome and wholesome traits (*kusala/akusalamula*). The important issue is the practical matter of how to reduce our unwholesome characteristics and develop the more wholesome ones. This process is symbolized by the lotus flower. Although rooted in the mud and muck at the bottom of a pond, the lotus grows upward to bloom on the surface, representing our potential to purify ourselves.

What are our unwholesome characteristics? They are usually summarized as the "three poisons" or roots of evil: *lobha*, "greed," *dosa*, "ill will," and *moha*, "delusion."⁴ The goal of the Buddhist way of life is to eliminate these roots by transforming them into their positive counterparts: greed into generosity (*dana*), ill will into loving-kindness (*metta*), and delusion into wisdom (*prajna*). If collective economic values cannot be separated from personal moral values, we need to ask: which traits are encouraged by our globalizing economic system?

GREED

Greed is an unpopular word both in corporate boardrooms and in economic theory. Economists talk about demand, but their

⁴ The familiar Tibetan Buddhist mandala known as the "Wheel of Life" symbolizes the three poisons as a cock (greed), a snake (ill will), and a pig (delusion), interlocked at the center or axle of the wheel, which as a whole represents samsara, this world of *dukkha*.

attempt to be objective and value-neutral does not allow them to evaluate different types of demand. From a Buddhist perspective, however, our capitalist system promotes and even requires greed in two ways: the "engine" of the economic process is the desire for profit, and in order to keep making that profit people must keep wanting to consume more.

Using these forms of greed to motivate people has been extraordinarily successful—depending, of course, on your definition of success. According to the Worldwatch Institute, more goods and services were consumed in the forty years between 1950 and 1990 (measured in constant dollars) than by all the previous generations in human history (Durning 1992, 38). This binge did not occur by itself; it took a lot of encouragement. According to the *United Nations Human Development Report (UNHDR)* for 1999, the world spent at least \$435 billion the previous year on advertising, not including public relations and marketing. The result is 270 million "global teens" who now inhabit a single pop-culture world, consuming the same designer clothes, music, and soft drinks.

While this growth has given us opportunities that our grandparents never dreamed of, we have also become more sensitive to the negative consequences, including the staggering ecological impact, and the worsening maldistribution of wealth. A child in the developed countries consumes and pollutes thirty to fifty times as much as a poor one in an undeveloped country, according to the same *UNHDR*. Today 1.3 billion people survive on less than a dollar a day, and almost half the world's population live on less than two dollars a day. The 20 percent of people in the richest countries enjoy 86 percent of the world's consumption, the poorest 20 percent only 1.3 percent—a gap that has worsened in the last decade.

But these grim facts about "their" *dukkha* should not keep us from noticing the consequences for "our own" *dukkha*. From a Buddhist perspective, the fundamental problem with consumerism is the delusion that consuming is the way to be happy. If insatiable desires (*tanha*) are the source of the frustration (*dukkha*) that we experience in our daily lives, then such consumption, which distracts us and intoxicates us, is not the solu-

tion to our unhappiness but one of its main symptoms. That brings us to the final irony of our addiction to consumption: according to the 1999 *UNHDR*, the percentage of Americans who considered themselves happy peaked in 1957, despite the fact that consumption per person has more than doubled since then. Nevertheless, studies of U.S. households have found that between 1986 and 1994 the amount of money people *think* they need to live happily has doubled. That seems paradoxical, but it is not difficult to explain: once we define ourselves as consumers, we can never have enough. For reasons we never quite understand, consumerism never really gives us what we want from it; it is always the next thing we buy that will satisfy us.

Higher incomes have enabled many people to become more generous, but increased *dana* has not been the main effect because capitalism is based upon a very different principle, that capital should be used to create more capital. Rather than redistributing our wealth, we prefer to invest that wealth as a means to accumulate more and spend more, regardless of whether or not we need more. This way of thinking has become natural for us, but it is uncommon in societies where advertising has not yet conditioned people into believing that happiness is something you can purchase. International development agencies have been slow to realize what anthropologists have long understood, that in traditional cultures, income is not the primary criterion of well-being. Sometimes it is not even a major one, as Delia Paul discovered in Zambia:

One of the things we found in the village which surprised us was people's idea of well-being and how that related to having money. We talked to a family, asking them to rank everybody in the village from the richest to the poorest and asking them why they would rank somebody as being less well off, and someone as poor. And we found that in the analysis money meant very little to the people. The person who was ranked as poorest in the village was a man who was probably the only person who was receiving a salary. (Chambers 1997, 179)

His review of the relevant anthropological literature led Robert Chambers to conclude: "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" (Chambers 1997, 178).

Isn't it a form of cultural imperialism to assume that we in the "developed" world must know more about worldly well-being than "undeveloped" societies do? Our obsession with economic growth seems natural to us because we have forgotten the historicity of the "needs" we now take for granted, and therefore what, for Buddhism, is an essential human attribute if we are to be happy: the importance of self-limitation, which requires some degree of non-attachment. Until they are seduced by the globalizing dream of a technological cornucopia, it does not occur to traditionally "poor" people to become fixated on fantasies about all the things they might have. Their ends are an expression of the means available to them. We project our own values when we assume that they must be unhappy, and that the only way to become happy is to start on the treadmill of a lifestyle increasingly preoccupied with consumption.

All this is expressed best in a Tibetan Buddhist analogy. The world is full of thorns and sharp stones (and now broken glass too). What should we do about this? One solution is to pave over the entire earth, but a simpler alternative is to wear shoes. "Paving the whole planet" is a good metaphor for our collective technological and economic project. Without the wisdom of self-limitation, we will not be satisfied even when we have used up all the earth's resources. The other solution is for our minds to learn how to "wear shoes," so that our collective ends become an expression of the renewable means that the biosphere provides.

Why do we assume that lack of money and consumer goods must be *dukkha*? That brings us to the heart of the matter. Material wealth has become increasingly important in the "developed" world because of our eroding faith in any other possibility of salvation—for example, in heaven with God, or the secular heaven of a worldly utopia. Increasing our standard of living has become so compulsive for so many of us because it serves as a substitute for traditional religious values.

From that perspective, 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, a new kind of mission to convert the heathen. Despite their benighted violence, some "Third-World terrorists" may understand this aspect of globalization better than we do.

ILL WILL

Conventional economic theory assumes that material resources are limited, but our desires are infinitely expandable. Without self-limitation, this situation becomes a formula for strife. As we know, desire frustrated is a major cause—perhaps the major cause—of ill will. The Buddha warned against negative feelings such as envy (*issa*) and avarice (*macchariya*).⁵ *Issa* becomes intense when certain possessions are enjoyed by some while others have no opportunity to acquire them. *Macchariya* is the selfish enjoyment of goods while greedily guarding them from others. A society in which such psychological tendencies predominate may be materially wealthy but it is spiritually poor.

The most important point, from a Buddhist perspective, is that our economic emphasis on competition, individual gain, and private possession encourages the development of ill will rather than loving-kindness. A society where people do not feel that they benefit from sharing with one another has already begun to break down.

DELUSION

For its proponents, the globalization of market capitalism is a victory for "free trade" over the inefficiency of protectionism and the corruption of special interests. Free trade seems to realize in the economic sphere the supreme value that we place on freedom. It optimizes access to resources and markets. What could be wrong with that?

Quite a bit, if we view free trade from the rather different perspective provided by Buddhism, which can help us to see

⁵ See, for example, *Majjhima Nikaya* I, 281-83, II, 247, and III, 204.

presuppositions usually taken for granted. A Buddhist viewpoint suggests that globalizing capitalism is neither natural (as economists, eager to be scientific, would have us believe) nor inevitable; despite its success, it is only one historically conditioned way of understanding and organizing the world.

The critical stage in the development of market capitalism occurred during the Industrial Revolution (1750-1850 in England), when new technologies led to the "liberation" of a critical mass of land, labor, and capital, which became understood in a new way, as commodities to be bought and sold. The world had to be converted into exchangeable "resources" in order for market forces to interact freely and productively. There was nothing inevitable about this commodification. In fact, it was strongly resisted by most people at the time and was successfully implemented only because of strong government support for it.

For those who had capital to invest, the Industrial Revolution was often very profitable, but, for most people, market commodification seems to have been experienced as a tragedy. The earth (which can be considered our mother as well as our home) became commodified into a collection of resources to be exploited. Human life became commodified into labor, or work time, also priced according to supply and demand. Family patrimony, the cherished inheritance preserved for one's descendants, became commodified into capital for investment, a new source of income for an entrepreneurial few. All three became treated as *means* that the new economy used to generate more capital.

From a religious perspective, an alternative way to describe this process is that the world and its beings (including us) became de-sacralized. When things are treated as commodities they lose their spiritual dimension. Today we see biotechnology doing this to the genetic code of life; soon our awe at the mysteries of reproduction will be replaced by the ultimate shopping experience. The developed world is now largely de-sacralized, but this social and economic transformation is far from finished. That is why the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) have become so important. Their role is to ensure that nothing stands in the way of converting the rest of the

BUDDHISM

earth—the "undeveloped world," to use our revealing term for it—into resources and markets.

This commodified understanding presupposes a sharp duality between humans and the rest of the earth. All value is created by our goals and desires; the rest of the world has no meaning or value except when it serves our purposes. However natural this dualistic understanding now seems to us, Buddhism views it as delusive. There are different accounts of what Buddha experienced when he became enlightened, but they agree that he realized the nondual interdependence of things. The world is a web; nothing has any reality of its own apart from that web, because everything, including us, is dependent on everything else. The Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh has expressed this well:

If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow, and without trees we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. . . .

If we look into this sheet of paper even more deeply, we can see the sunshine in it. If the sunshine is not there, the tree cannot grow. In fact, nothing can grow. Even we cannot grow without sunshine. And so, we know that the sunshine is also in this sheet of paper. The paper and the sunshine inter-are. And if we continue to look, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. And we see the wheat. We know that the logger cannot exist without his daily bread, and therefore the wheat that became his bread is also in this sheet of paper. And the logger's father and mother are in it too. . . .

You cannot point out one thing that is not here—time, space, the earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat. . . . As thin as this sheet of paper is, it contains everything in the universe in it. (Hanh 1988, 3-5)

This interdependence challenges our usual sense of separation from the world. The feeling that I am "in here," inside my head behind my eyes, and the world is "out there" is at the root of our *dukkha*, for it alienates us from the world we are "in." The Buddhist path works by helping us to realize our interdependence and nonduality with the world, and to live in accordance with that. This path is incompatible with a consumerist way of understanding that commodifies the earth and reinforces our delusive sense of separation from it and other people.

SOCIALLY ENGAGED BUDDHISM

It is easy to criticize, of course, and much more difficult to practice what we preach. How well have Buddhist cultures lived up to the values and ideals presented in this chapter?

Historically, the social role of Asian Buddhism has been limited by the subordination of Buddhist institutions to autocratic and usually oppressive rulers. Colonization by European powers created new problems for indigenous Buddhist cultures, but also introduced Western concepts of democracy, human rights, and social justice. The end of colonialism saw the birth of many "engaged Buddhist" movements, such as Sarvodaya Shramadana (a self-help organization working to revitalize villages in Sri Lanka), Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's Suan Mokkh (reforming Buddhism in modern Thailand), the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (based in Thailand, and incorporating many grassroots, volunteer groups devoted to peace work and community development), and several Japanese organizations including Rissho Koseikai and Soka Gakkai. The most prominent figures have been Tenzin Gyatso, the fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet (awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989), and Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Zen master, poet, and antiwar activist quoted above (nominated by Martin Luther King Jr. for the Nobel Peace Prize).

In recent years socially engaged Buddhism has become a significant presence in the West as well, as seen for example in the Zen Peacemaker Order (based in New York) and the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, an association of over four thousand mostly

BUDDHISM

American Buddhists committed both to Buddhist practice and social involvement.⁶ Some of the people in these organizations are participating in the recent worldwide movement to ensure that economic globalization benefits people rather than transnational corporations. It is too early to know what the impact of such engaged Buddhism will be, but the synthesis of Buddhist practice and social action seems to be a potent one.

CONCLUSION

Buddhism began with the enlightenment of Shakyamuni Buddha. His "awakening" (the literal meaning of "Buddha") shows us that it is possible to experience the world in a very different way if we transform our greed into generosity, our ill will into loving-kindness, and our delusions into wisdom. From a materialistic perspective, including the "social science" of economics, such religious orientations are superstitious and escapist. From a Buddhist perspective, however, economic growth and consumerism are unsatisfactory alternatives because they evade the basic problem of life by distracting us with symbolic substitutes such as money, status, and power. Similar critiques of idolatry are found in all the great religions, and rampant economic globalization makes that message all the more important today.⁷

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Does Buddhism encourage a life of poverty? Why or why not?
2. What is *dana*? Why is it so important in Buddhism?
3. What are the "three poisons" (also known as the three roots of evil)? What are their economic implications?
4. What is "socially engaged Buddhism"?

⁶ Two informative books on socially engaged Buddhism are *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* (1996) and *Engaged Buddhism in the West* (2000), both edited by Christopher Queen. See the suggested reading below.

⁷ I am grateful to Jon Watts and Sanikaro Bhikkhu for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper.