

BUDDHISM, ETHICS, ECONOMICS, AND THE ENVIRONMENT: A PRACTICAL PRECAUTIONARY INTEGRATIVE APPROACH TO ECOLOGICAL ISSUES

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Abstract: *This paper examines various aspects of Buddhism to a growing call for an ethical approach toward the intersection of economics and environmentalism. Discussions of key concepts as utilized by the disciplines of economics and ecological sciences in parallel with Buddhist scholarly research are employed in order to forge a framework that embraces a hybrid social, political, ecological, and economic interrelationship with the quest for human well-being and environmental responsibility. In order to avoid the path of civilizations that have followed the road to ruin mainly by depleting or destroying the natural resource base (Dale and Carter 1955) through inattentive economic pursuits, Buddhist ethics presents a pathway to a sustainable economics that protects and conserves our eco-system services.*

Key words: Buddhism, Ethics, Economics, Environment, Ecological Issues

Well Being and Eco-Reliance

Just as biodiversity and ecosystems have a symbiotic relationship, the human species is also dependent on the complex systems (eco-system services) that support life on our planet. Our well-being and [economic] development strongly depend on the biodiversity existing in these ecosystems. Whether we manage a household, run a small business, or manage Fortune 500 corporations we are engaged in some kind of economic activity. Jim Stanford points out in his book (Stanford 2008, 20) *Economics for Everyone: A Short Guide to the Economics of Capitalism*, "Just by walking around your neighborhood, you can identify the crucial factors determining economic affairs in your community." The problem has been poor management of resource use coupled with skewed economics that has disregarded our interactions with ecosystem functions. Dale and Carter in their book '*Top Soil and Civilization*' maintain, "economic maladjustment including concentration of wealth and or concentration of land tenure in relation to decline of civilizations has been prevalent in the decline of many civilizations and it is doubtful that this is more of a cause than an effect." Dale and Carter further argue that, "means of correction be it revolution, taxes, or other means to redistribute wealth were usually found.

As we engage in economic activities, we tend to look at concerns through a human-centric lens of how our own species is affected. With all negotiations, trades, and transactions, we are caught up in them (initial) on how those transactions occur and how they affect our well-being as individuals, as organizations firms or as nation states. We tend to forget that we are beholden to the earth and all her resources and systems-- not only for all that we do-- but

also for our very survival. It is apparent that economic systems do not have **built-in** standards that embrace social or environmental ethics. Ecosystems and the species that they harbor cannot advocate for themselves. The human community is responsible for integrating economic and ecological considerations in all aspects of decision-making from individual choices, to decision making by local communities and all the way through the variety of institutions that comprise the global arena. Our Living Earth is the sum total of all places (Schwartzman 1999) in which organisms live and depend upon.

The Trans disciplinary Journal of the International Society for Ecological Economics (ISEE) makes the case, "the management of nature's household (ecology) and humankind's household (economics) have been mired in their conceptual and professional isolation that has in turn led to economic and environmental policies which are mutually destructive rather than reinforcing in the long term" (Howarth n.d.).

Economics: Rethinking Definitions

One of the earliest and most famous definitions of economics (Ozgur 2011) was that of Thomas Carlyle, who in the early 19th century termed it the "dismal science." 19th century English economist, W. Stanley Jevons, defined economics as "the mechanics of utility and self-interest (Jevons 1879, 23)." Economics is also defined as the study of (Stretton 1999) the production and consumption of goods and the transfer of wealth in order to produce and obtain those goods. Economics attempts to explain the practical aspects of how people interact within markets and how actors within markets (consumers, firms and governments) behave.

Economists Robert Costanza and Herman (1992) Daly use the terms natural capital, human capital and manufactured capital to correspond roughly to these traditional economic production factors, whereby 'natural capital' included land, air, water, sea and ecosystems, and manufactured capital encompasses all material goods generated through economic activity and technological change. If we are to achieve sustainable use of our (critical) natural capital, it is therefore essential to address not only the ecological, but also the socio-cultural and economic dimensions (De Groot, et al. 2003).

Understanding Our Environment

Many important ecological functions take place without our economic and cultural acknowledgement and they beg a better approach. Granted that nature's intrinsic value (HM Government (UK) 2011) is recognized in various scientific communities, the scientists from around the world have now developed assessment tools by which we can more accurately measure the value of natural world. Government and society need to account better for the value of nature, particularly the services and resources it provides. This inter-disciplinary approach requires adopting a keen awareness.

Making the Connections-Buddhist View: Responsibility, Economics and Ecology

Life on earth is interactive –a complexity of systems as never understood in Buddha's time. *Hari Bansh Jha, in Buddhist Economics and the Modern World*, (1979, Nepal Press, Kathmandu) writes: "In order to understand the Buddhist view of economics it would be essential to study the socio-economic structure of the society in the age of the Buddha. The majority of the population depended on agriculture for their livelihood (as well as an

occupation). The state paid special attention for the betterment of agriculture and disallowed agriculturalists to be effected by war or other disturbances.”

Our cultural concerns, systems of economics and scientific knowledge, coupled with unprecedented world population growth did not exist at the time of the Buddha. However, Buddha gave very important tools to apply to our current problems, which includes specific ways in how to look at the cause and effect of our actions. This cause and effect approach is applicable to how our current economics systems intertwine with and impact earth's ecological systems.

Buddhism speaks about the cultural aspect of engaging virtue-based ethics and putting it into an actionable practice. James Miller has argued for the need for a “cultural justification” for sustainability (Clippard 2011, 240). Miller (2009) notes: “with the right cultural framework, the right set of beliefs, values, habits and orientation, sustainability moves from the arena of discourse to the arena of practice. When sustainability is embedded culturally, it unconsciously shapes the habits of thinking and the patterns of behavior in the way that people barely notice. In short, it comes to define our way of life, our civic values, and our sense of identity.”(Miller 2009).

Environmental problems such as pollution are issues of the modern age, which didn't exist during the time of the Buddha. Nevertheless, as Buddhism is a full-fledged philosophy of life reflecting all aspects of experience, it is possible to find enough material in the Pāli canon to delineate the Buddhist attitude towards nature.”

Every creature on this earth has a role in sustaining human lives. We need to cultivate an attitude and a sense of gratitude to other living beings, however small they may seem, and however alien they may appear to a particular tradition (Burnier 1997, 11) or enterprise. Buddhism deals precisely with the universal responsibility toward all beings (Burnier 1997, 11).

Buddha taught essentially two fundamental teachings: rebirth and the cause and effect of Kamma [wholesome or unwholesome action] (Ariyaratne 1999, 5) (Rahula Revised ed. edition 1974). Buddha argues that elimination [or extinction: nibbāna] of the belief in the self [attā] [as in self-centeredness] should inevitably bring about happiness to mankind (Dissanayake 1977, V). The pragmatic components or steps to this goal of extinction of suffering are by way of the Eightfold Path [*aṭṭhangika-magga*]. Via the Eight fold Path one takes part in those values constitutive of enlightenment, namely morality (*sīla*) and insightful knowledge or wisdom (*pañña*) (Keown 2001, 107)

The Eightfold Path and Three Fold Training

In his first sermon, Buddha declared that those laypersons wishing to lead a pure life should avoid both the extreme of self-indulgence and asceticism; rather a person should select the Middle Way (Pryor 1990) which is exemplified by the Eightfold Path (*aṭṭhangika-magga*).

Three Fold Training

Eightfold Path

Sīla (Refinement of Physical & Verbal Conduct*)	Right Speech
	Right Action
	Right Livelihood
Samādhi (Calmness of Mind/Focus*)	Right Effort
	Right Mindfulness
	Right Concentration
Paññā (Insight or Wisdom*)	Right View
	Right Intention

Source: (Bhikkhu, Culavedalla Sutta: The Shorter Set of Questions-and-Answers (MN 44), 1988)

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Oxford trained economist E.F. Schumacher, in his classical call for the end of excessive consumption --*Small Is Beautiful- Economics as if People Mattered* --starts his chapter on *Buddhist Economics* with the words: “Right livelihood is one of the requirements of the Buddha’s Noble Eightfold Path. It is clear therefore, that there must be such a thing as Buddhist Economics” (Schumacher 1973).

Phra Payutto states that “environmental problems must be addressed on the three levels: “behavior,” “the mind,” and “understanding” (Payutto 1995, 91). These three levels (Clippard 2011, 222) correspond to the three parts of the eight-fold path—*sīla* (behavior), *samādhi* (the mind), and *paññā* (understanding). From this example, we see the degree to which Payutto, although responding to a contemporary social and ethical problem, returns to the very foundation of Buddhism to construct a response (Clippard 2011, 222).

Buddha addresses “Right View” [and in [MN 9 Sammaditthi Sutta](#)] in his teaching to the monks by stating, “Monks, when right view is supported by five factors, it has awareness-release as its fruit, awareness-release as its reward; it has discernment-release as its fruit, discernment-release as its reward. Which five? “There is the case where right view is supported by virtue, supported by learning, supported by discussion, supported by tranquility, supported by insight. “When supported by these five factors, right view has awareness-release as its fruit, awareness-release as its reward; it has discernment-release as its fruit,

discernment-release as its reward." [AN 5.25 Anuggahita Sutta] [Anguttara Nikaya fourth book of the Sutta Pitaka].

Buddha also taught that the four sublime states (Digha Nikaya 13) are an answer to all situations (Thera 2011). Those four states are as under:

1. Metta-loving kindness (Karaniya Metta Sutta: Good Will *)
2. Upekkha-equanimity
3. Karuna- compassion
4. Mudita- sympathetic joy (*Mettā* or loving-kindness is another concept commonly used as the basis of a Buddhist environmental ethic (Clippard 2011, 220).)

Seth Devere Clippard points out in his writings that, "*Mettā* is often connected to *ahisā*, and the doctrine of non-harm. Because one is enjoined to not harm...this precludes actions that may cause harm. In other words, if *ahisā* is the goal, *mettā* is the method" (Clippard, 2011).

We need to keep in mind that Buddha did not teach economics (Ariyaratne 1999, 5) nor did he address ecological ethics. Neither existed as specialized disciplines back then. As indicated, the Buddhist concept of human morality, besides suggesting a code of conduct has direct bearing on our living in the natural environment and can be extrapolated to Jevon's framework of "the mechanics of utility and self-interest." However, Buddha's Words on Loving-Kindness (*mettā*) is a direct indication of Buddha's concern for all beings. He said "So with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings; radiating kindness over the entire world: spreading upwards to the skies, and downwards to the depths;"

"The directives on the Eightfold Path concerning ethics (*sīla*) are likewise intended to limit the harm one might do. Right speech, right action, and right livelihood provide guidelines for living that are intended to diminish the harm done to other beings in the course of daily life (Clippard 2011, 220)." This construct of avoiding harm rooted in practical actions is not separate from economic behaviors that in turn can create conditions that can conserve and protect ecosystems.

A.T. Ariyaratne points out in his book *Schumacher Lectures on Buddhist Economics*, "The economic life of a human being cannot be separated from his/her total life and living" [on Planet Earth!]. Ariyaratne stresses further, "In fact the entire living world is treated from a holistic perspective. Buddha showed that economics is only a fragment of life and living: therefore, moral and social implications of economic activity cannot be considered apart from economics" (Ariyaratne 1999).

The initial response by Buddhism to the changing natural resource pattern in sixth century B.C.E. became more pronounced as exploitation of nature intensified during the succeeding centuries where overharvesting and deforestation created erosion of the resource base (Pathak 2004). In Piya Tan's translations (Tan n.d.) of the *Cakkavatti Sutta* [*Cakkavattisihanada Sutta*] *The Wheel-turning Emperor* of the *Cakkavattisihanada Sutta*, is mentioned that this Sutta "Using mythical language, gives us an insight into the early Buddhist view of kingship and governance, especially how moral virtue is closely linked with

socioeconomic conditions, and of how crime arises in society. Ultimately, conditions will deteriorate to the point of a "sword-interval," in which swords appear in the hands of all human beings, and they hunt one another like game. A few people, however, will take shelter in the wilderness to escape the carnage, and when the slaughter is over, they will come out of hiding and resolve to take up a life of skillful and virtuous action again (Bhikkhu, Cakkavatti Sutta: The Wheel-turning Emperor 2012).

The Anguttara-nikaya Sutta contains that which is similar to the Aggañña Sutta: degeneration of man and natural conditions due to human ignorance and greed, in turn, breed more desire, selfishness and distrust. The overall message of these is ethical-- where the actions discussed are caused by willful heedlessness and exploitation. Lily Di Silva explains further that according to Cakkavattisihanada Sutta when human morals undergo further degeneration, all delicacies such as ghee, butter, honey, etc. will disappear from the earth; what is left is considered the poorest coarse food of the day that will become the delicacy of that day. This maintains that there is a close link between human moral actions and the availability of natural resources (Kaza, Stephanie; Kraft, Kenneth 2000, 93-94). S.K. Pathak in Buddhism and Ecology explains that the *Cakkavattisihanada Sutta* acknowledged and addressed the result of the ecological imbalances occurring at that time. According to *Cakkavattisihanada Sutta*, "When humanity is demoralized through greed, famine is a natural outcome; when moral degeneration is due to ignorance, epidemic is the inevitable result; when hatred is the demoralizing force, widespread violence is the ultimate outcome".

The application of Buddha's teachings can be integrated into any economic system. This application can take a practical approach. Ecological harm and negative impacts that our economics systems have not taken into account can now reflect upon and account for the full social cost of ecological harm.

The Four Noble Truths as an Economic Equation

The Four Noble Truths makes the case that 1. There is Suffering, 2. Cause and Effect Equal Suffering, 3. Suffering Can End, 4. The Path to End Suffering is the Eightfold Path. A concise entry point for approaching Buddhism is *The Four Noble Truths* according to the Dharmakaya Trungram Gyaltrul Rinpoche's Dharmakaya Retreat Center. "The Four Noble Truths constitute a complete equation inside of which one can find all the ideas of Buddhist teaching. The equation works as follows: 1) recognize the problem (suffering); 2) locate its root cause (mental clinging); 3) know that the problem can be solved; and 4) prescribe a solution (the noble eightfold path) (Dharmakaya Retreat Center 2012)."

Many of the Buddhist Suttas, [Suttas: Pali; Sanskrit: *sūtra* refers to a "discourse" in the Pali canon attributed to the Buddha or one of his disciples] reveal addressing the notion of experience, examination, results of cause and effect and illustrate more than a list of virtues to apply to the economic and environmental challenges of our modern age, for example, "He who has understanding and great wisdom does not think of harming himself or another, nor of harming both alike. He rather thinks of his own welfare, of that of others, of that of both, and of the welfare of the whole world. In that way one shows understanding and great wisdom." [Angutara Nikaya4/186].

Conclusion: Buddhism, Ecology and Economy- A Threefold Relationship

It is now commonly agreed in many circles that the growth of world trade and investment has transformed the ground rules for economic policy (Krugman, Cooper and Srinivas 1995). E.F. Schumacher also writes in *Small is Beautiful- Economics as if People Mattered*, "Buddhist economics must be very different from the economics of modern materialism, since the Buddhist sees the essence of civilization not in multiplication of wants but in purification of human character. Character, at the same time, is formed primarily by a man's (and women's !) work. And work, properly conducted in conditions of human dignity and freedom, blesses those who do it and equally in their products".

E.F. Schumacher goes on to say, "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."

In her introduction to *Ecological Responsibility: A Dialogue with Buddhism –A collection Of Essays and Talks*—Julia Martin points out: "The Earth is being exploited along with her creatures (humans and other species).The Earth is suffering. All beings are suffering. The way out of suffering begins with rediscovering our interconnections with living systems, an understanding that liberates us from the illusory world of *self* and *other through a compassionate commitment to relieve suffering.*"

We can interpret all these esteemed discussions plus the collective knowledge that we now possess and understand about the biosphere and the environment into new economic pathways. We have created a body of environmental laws based on scientific knowledge. As we carry out our economics activities in the U.S. (or elsewhere), we are called to abide by laws enacted (Right Action- Right Effort- Right View). In the U.S. to protect human impacts upon the environment we have the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act, and the Endangered Species Act. Economics as practiced, whether it be in households, or communities or in larger arenas can incorporate a commitment to protecting our Earth's ecosystems.

According to the *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development*, "Sustainable development which implies meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, should become a central guiding principle of the United Nations, Governments and private institutions, organizations and enterprises..." (Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, 96th plenary meeting, 11 December 1987 United Nations General Assembly). The Buddhist approach of *Cause and Effect* to end the suffering caused by human actions can be a guidepost to actions that are rooted in an economics that lacks mindfulness. It is where the Deep Ecology Movement embarks upon Buddhist environmental and economic ethic where the self is integrated into "a Great Self" (Cooper and James 2005, 148) which "operates

out of a deep-seated respect and even veneration for ways and forms of life and accords them 'equal right to live and blossom' (Weber 2001, 350-351)."

This of course is not to say that Buddhism has all the answers to our ecological and economic problems. However, at this critical time when political will, economic goals and environmental needs are clashing, we have a call for a practical revision, a Buddhist ethic that reflects on our responsibilities as part of the living earth community. We can turn our economic systems toward a *middle way* of actionable behaviors that embrace virtues that uphold the reality of our species as a keystone species that can ensure the flourishing of the many communities of living organisms on this planet.

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