



Buddhist Economics: A Cultural Alternative¹

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1. Introduction

Watching weeds grow in the garden turns out to be a powerful lesson outside the classroom. First, the weeds look innocently beautiful until they start invading the space of the expensive grass that is fighting for survival. Alarmed, the gardener moves into action with industrial-strength weedkiller. Before long, the herbicide poisons both the weeds and grass. Alas, weeks later, it is the weed that manages to survive the new level of toxicity in the soil and springs back to life ahead of the grass. The battle resumes with the weeds ahead.

Buddhist teachings focus on purifying the mind of “weeds” such as greed, anger and delusion. A practitioner



Greed, anger, and delusion are like “weeds,” they must be removed by the roots for a permanent result.

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does so by “planting” seeds of virtues such as right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration (collectively known as the Noble Eightfold Path) and encouraging the training of ethics, meditative concentration and wisdom. The goal of Buddhist practice is to lessen suffering, for the self and others. This objective is accomplished by the cultivation of one inexhaustible natural resource, the mind, in order to produce human virtues. According to Zsolnai, unfortunately, such Buddhist teachings are in opposition to western economics (Zsolnai, *Why Buddhist Economics?* 2011, p.3). One system encourages the moderation of desires for the benefit of self, community and nature. The other encourages hedonism and the accumulation of wealth. The battlefield within individual minds also extends to the physical world. The training of the mind to be less dependent on toxic sensations will help to assure balanced co-existence of both systems, assuring mental and physical wellbeing, for the self and others.

Without “throwing the baby out with the bathwater,” this chapter surveys contemporary economic models and “experiments” that inject Buddhist principles into secular systems as well as economic exchanges in Buddhist sanctuaries. I shall explore the ongoing dialogues between these two apparently incompatible systems and study how Buddhist communities have engaged in a harmonious partnership that combines Buddhist values and wisdom with existing economic paradigms. The critical success factor for this paradigm shift lies in the Buddhist discovery of the truth of karma and *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent co-origination).

2. Secular Communities

2.1 Buddhist Teachings and Western Economic Models

Buddhists realize that there are causes and conditions behind every phenomenon. In other words, each event is dependent on the co-arising of a complex network of causes and conditions (dependent co-origination). Karma, a kind of power formed as a result of each past deed, speech or thought, determines which sets of conditions arise. Since these causes and conditions are transitory in nature, attachment to any phenomenon will only result in *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness). This dependent co-origination model explains

that attachment to income and wealth or any transitory mental and physical phenomena only provides for temporary satisfaction (Ash, Happiness and Economics: A Buddhist Perspective 2007, p.214) and will inevitably result in further suffering (Ash, Do Our Economic Choices Make Us Happy? 2011, p.119). Ignorance to the working principles of karma and dependent co-origination can lead to erroneous decisions driven by greed, anger and delusion (the three principal Buddhist poisonous causes) that will not lead to balanced co-existence and optimum results.

One important result of the Buddhist teachings of karma and dependent co-origination is the promotion of cyclical rather than linear thinking, as well as awareness of a spectrum of interdependent factors. Permaculture today has utilized such principles. For example, free-range chickens have a symbiotic relationship with the environment, eating weeds, fallen fruit and insect pests. In return, chickens provide manure and clean the environment of rotten fruit and pests. By caging chickens, farmers broke the cycle and had to busy themselves with feeding, cleaning and pest control activities. Worse, toxins released from the pesticides resulted in a self-degenerating system (Linear vs. Cyclical Paradigms and Permaculture Mind). Mindfulness of such natural interdependence can lead to alternative commercial decisions.

Buddhists do not object to economic progress unless it causes suffering for the self and others. One purpose of Buddhist practice is to seek joy, peace and harmony, not only for oneself but also for all sentient beings. This is no different from the original aim of economics. Smith (1723–1790), recognized as the father of classical economics and a moral philosopher, believed in human perfection and happiness and that each individual lives as a member of a family, state and “society of mankind” (Powers 1956, pp.223–224). In this model, self-interest can be balanced with greater good. Unfortunately, economic policies of recent times narrowed the goals to full and efficient employment of people and capital, economic growth, and the reduction of income inequality (George 1975, p.284). With these limited goals, the capitalist system has generated some impressive results. Between 1990 and 2013, the number of people living in extreme poverty dropped by more than half, from 1.85 billion to 770 million, and child mortality has dropped by nearly half, while literacy and vaccinations have all increased

(Duflo and Mosenkis 2017). However, the 2016 World Happiness Report indicates that happiness inequality has increased significantly among the world's population and such inequality leads to a reduction of happiness (Helliwell et al. 2016, p.4). Findings such as this undermine the belief that self-centred financial capital growth can lead to happiness.

Recent attention to the topic of happiness is encouraging. Humanity has often envisioned a better world or looked back towards a Golden Age of peace, harmony, stability and rule by the wise and compassionate. This universal pursuit finds common ground between economics and Buddhism. The highly-competitive and global agenda today represents one extreme of radically autonomous and self-interested societies while the utopian connected, altruistic and cooperative economy another extreme (Nelson 2011, p.29). Advocating either end of the spectrum leads to dualistic thinking and will only lead to unhealthy opposition. In this world of constant flux, there is a Middle Way.

The application of economic ideas that stem from Buddhist thought is commonly known as Buddhist Economics (Alexandrin 1993, p.3). The pioneering *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if people mattered* by E.F. Schumacher (1911–1977) in 1955 uses the principles of right livelihood, interdependence and Middle Way to propose a non-violent way in economic and political life. His ideal model maximizes satisfaction rather than consumption, measures harmony rather than annual consumption, and seeks to raise the value of an employee instead of viewing him as a cost item (Guruge 2008, pp.41–42). Schumacher makes a strong case against the western belief that universal prosperity will bring about peace, but instead argues that the world's population strife for wealth will only widen the poverty gap and over-stretch the planet's fossil fuel reserves (Schumacher 1973). Unfortunately, Schumacher's argument for a human-centred economic model that would enable human and environmental sustainability has been labelled as "romantic idealism" (Bunting 2011).

Although this ideal did not materialize, it inspired subsequent models that became the basis of several successful implementations.

Buddhist economics is determined by an individual's behavior which in turn is governed by the mind. Hence, Buddhist training emphasizes and begins with the acquisition of right view through education. Decision-makers need to

be aware of the problems created by the existing economic system(s) and the inescapable laws of dependent co-origination. Stemming from Schumacher's proposal, the training also involves right understanding so that decisions not only optimize human satisfaction (quality of life) but also complement nature and the society-at-large (Prayukvong 2005, p.1174).

Thailand's Venerable Payutto Dhammapitaka's (b. 1938) published *Buddhist Economics—A middle way for the market place* in 1992. He proposes a spiritual approach to economics based on personal development called "harmonious happiness." In this model, economic transactions are altruistically based (motivated by goodwill and compassion) and directed towards the wellbeing of society (Guruge 2008, p.57). It predicates upon the practice of meditation and mental training to contemplate the mental conditions (motivation) leading to (un) ethical behavior, thereby helping one to better resist unwholesome compulsions (Guruge 2008, p.62). Payutto also advocates meditation (rather than wealth) as a means to inner peace because it enables one to use wealth for social good rather than for personal gratification (Guruge 2008, p.63).



Venerable Payutto
Dhammapitaka

Magnuson's *Pathways to a Mindful Economy* reminds readers that active social participation is a mindful practice that the Buddha recommended (Magnuson 2011, p.99). In a mindful economy, smaller-scale local economic systems become the starting point for more comprehensive changes to evolve. An example is a growing socially-responsible community of more than 1600 for-profit companies from 42 countries and over 120 industries certified as "Beneficial Corporations" because they meet rigorous social and environmental performance, accountability, and transparency standards (What are B Corps? 2017). People in mindful economies such as B-Corps are motivated by core values that are not greed nor self-indulgence-based. The issue now is how to steer companies away from growth-oriented, profit-driven capitalist systems into community-based, sustainable systems (Magnuson 2011, pp.105–107).

Chang believes that the evolution of economic systems today has prepared companies to adopt a Buddhist wisdom-based economic model (Chang 2006, p.173). In this ideal state, decisions are coordinated to yield harmony for the animate and inanimate realms. With high levels of insight based on Buddhist wisdom, individuals do not rely on consumption for happiness (Chang 2006, p.175). Contrary to popular paradigm, the self becomes the factor of production that can be sacrificed (Chang 2006, p.179). In this wisdom-based model, the right view of karma and dependent co-origination enables the self to be sacrificed for greater public good.

The preceding discussion is by no means an exhaustive listing of Buddhist economic models nor an attempt to demonstrate the superiority of Buddhist paradigms. Buddhists are encouraged to avoid the temptations of self-righteousness and instead, be open to engaging with businesses, governments and the larger suffering world (Nelson 2011, p.32). Below we shall explore how the Buddhist economic theories are put into practice in secular communities.

2.2 Buddhist Economic Practice in Secular Communities

The most visionary model in practice today comes from the Buddhist kingdom of Bhutan with its famous Gross National Happiness (GNH) index defined in terms of the four pillars of economic development, good governance, cultural preservation and nature conservation. The Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path is mapped to each GNH component for the wellbeing of the nation through a mixed economy that does not adopt the extremes of either capitalism or communism. Bhutan is attempting to exercise the Middle Way by “mixing” market forces with some central government leadership, with a more holistic and systemic human life understanding (Tideman 2011, pp.146–150). GNH, coined in 1972 and institutionalized in 2008, has been Bhutan’s contribution to the world. The 2015 GNH index findings show that there was a 1.8% increase in GNH over the previous five years and a 2.5% increase in its population being happier (Centre for Bhutan Studies and GNH Research 2015). Still in its early stages of implementation (compared to capitalism which can be traced to the Middle Ages in Europe), the GNH model will need time to mature and for its long-term effects to be assessed.

The Royal Thai Sufficiency Economy Model, launched by the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej (1946–2016) after the 1997 economic crisis, operates on the principles of moderation, reasonableness, self-immunity, wisdom and integrity (Essen 2011, p.61). Essen gives an example of a Thai mulberry paper business that refused bank loans and would only expand according to the availability of surplus funds. The owner invested in employee training and environmental wellbeing. As at the writing of the paper, the enterprise had 400 employees (Essen 2011, p.67). This sufficiency model is compatible with capitalist economy but does not over-extend the businesses into credit.

Thailand has experimented with complementary economic models. Prayukvong examined three rural communities that fared better than major institutions during the financial crisis of 1997. The leaders of the successful Na Muen Sri Weaving Group, Bor Kul Housewives Group and Ta Mod Farmer's Group were committed to the community groups they belonged even though they could have made more money if they had set up their own businesses. By not putting personal interests as their first priority, these compassionate leaders chose "a path whereby they as individuals can coexist with society and nature to achieve a certain quality of life" (Prayukvong 2005, p.1184). In addition, the Ta Mod group engaged both Buddhist monks and eminent Muslims in its project. Such interfaith collaboration underlines the wish for all humanity to live together peacefully.

Also in Thailand, the Santi Asoke Buddhist Reform Movement of Thailand eschews material comfort in order to attain spiritual freedom. Members practice right livelihood in the Three Professions of natural agriculture, chemical-free fertilizer, and waste management, with work perceived as meditation and a path to enlightenment. However, the general Thai public deemed this Reform as being too austere for ordinary farmers (Essen 2011, pp.68–70).

In Sri Lanka, another Buddhist country, the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement serviced 15,000 villages in just over half a century (History 2017). On its website, Sarvodaya publishes its mission to create a "no poverty, no affluence, and a conflict-free society" in order to "uplift and empower the most disadvantaged people in Sri Lanka" (Philosophy and Approach 2017). Sarvodaya believes that a country does not have enough resources to provide



The Surya Foundation and Sarvodaya jointly organize a medical team to provide healthcare services to Galbokka Village in Kosgoda, Sri Lanka.

affluence to all, that the social, environmental, moral and cultural costs incurred in the process of attempting to build an affluent society are too high, and that an affluent society is not necessarily a happy one (Ariyaratne 1999, p.36). Instead, the goal is awakening at the individual,² family,³ village, urban, national and global levels (Philosophy and Approach 2017). To this goal, Sarvodaya provides simple means to satisfy basic human needs such as water, clothing, food, housing, healthcare, communication, energy, education, culture and spiritual needs (Ariyaratne 1999, p.37). Underlying the aim to build a full-engagement society is the important concept of right livelihood and not full employment, as western economics will have it. Every individual, including children and elders, must be socially engaged in meaningful ways to meet the basic needs spelled out.

Based on the experiences of implementing variants of models based on Buddhist teachings, it seems that harmonious co-existence of humanistic

2. The four sublime abodes of individual awakening are: loving kindness, compassion, joy and equanimity.

3. The four Buddhist prescriptions of family awakening are: giving, kind and intelligible words, right livelihood, and equality.

values and the existing systems of the state is possible. Through moderation in production and consumption, ethical behavior, mindful consumption and altruistic, compassionate action that are aligned to the Buddha's teachings (and incidentally, not very different from Adam Smith's propositions of moral sentiments), there will be respectful consideration for resources (natural and manmade), dignity accorded to the human being (rather than being relegated to the role as a factor of production), and analysis of impact to environmental, human, social, cultural and other factors before production.

2.3 Practice at a Personal Level

Economic or any action, for that matter, is driven by one's motivation. Amartya Sen (b. 1933), recipient of the 1998 Nobel Prize in Economic Science, vehemently disagrees with the first principle of economics that claims "every agent is actuated only by self-interest" and proposes commitment as an important behavior determinant (Sen 1977, pp.317 & 343). His assertion is confirmed by new neuro- and behavioral science findings that discovered that human nature is not driven by greed and egoism only; equally important are principles of justice, cooperation and altruism (Tideman 2011, p.144). Tideman notices that every market player is an active co-creator of a continuous dynamic process, much as in the principle of dependent co-origination. A giant of western American philosophy, Charles Pierce (b. 1839), proposed that the driving force in successful human life is not greed but compassion (Lancaster 2006, p.47). Judging from the intuitive right choices that enable the survival of the human race, Pierce argues that compassion is a part of human nature while selfish actions are learned attitudes. This position is very much in line with the intrinsic Buddhist Buddha nature theory.

How do these apply to the contemporary economic problem? Buddhists and non-Buddhists admit the same issues; however, their problem-solving methods are different. Buddhists acknowledge that tangible resources (including manpower) are limited in supply. Instead of setting price points to match or curtail demand, they advocate cherishing all direct and indirect, natural and manufactured resources. Waste is frowned upon. For example, orientation of newcomers to Buddhist temples often include an admonition to "cherish

the possessions of the temple as though protecting one's eyeball." Buddhist monastics set an example by consuming only just sufficient basic necessities for survival and dedicating themselves to self-study and service to others. Buddhists remain a part of the economic cycle but are taught to become disciplined, ethical and responsible consumers.

While Buddhist monastics take a vow of poverty, householders do not. In the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, the Buddha recognizes the need for a layperson to spend on food, clothing and shelter; attending to family members, relatives, friends and guests; illness and emergencies; charity; alms and meritorious activities; and payment of taxes (Guruge 2008, p.45). The householder is not advised to spend his wealth indulging in sense pleasures. The Buddha's definition of prosperity includes both abundance of material good as well as virtue and knowledge (Guruge 2008, p.44). Right livelihood,⁴ interpreted as the foundation of Buddhist economics by Schumacher, excludes trade in weapons, living beings, intoxicants and poisons; slaughtering animals and fishing; military service; deceit and treachery; soothsaying; trickery and usury (Guruge 2008, p.48). The benefits of such livelihood include longevity, good complexion, health and comfort, as well as energy or power that is, overall wellbeing (Guruge 2008, p.49).

Shinichi Inoue, former President of the Japanese Miyazaki Bank and reputed economist, demonstrated the possibility of putting Buddhist teachings into practice. In his book, *Putting Buddhism to Work*, Inoue combined the best of capitalist and socialist economic models into an inter-dependent, sustainable and ecologically sound system (Weeraratna 2012). Inoue claims that the one should not engage in businesses that do not serve the world and that the goal of business should be to serve the community with the profit coming as a by-product (Zsolnai, *Why Buddhist Economics?* 2011, p.7).

In order for people and nature to co-exist on this increasingly fragile planet, Venerable Master Hsing Yun (b. 1927) promotes the Five Harmonies⁵

4. One of the Noble Eightfold Paths: right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

5. The Five Harmonies are "Individual harmony achieved through joy; family harmony achieved through deference; interpersonal harmony achieved through respect; social harmony achieved through cooperation; world harmony achieved through peace".



One-day Meditation Retreat at Nan Tien Temple. A Venerable guides an outdoor meditation session, the participants rejoicing in inner peace and tranquility, feeling relaxed and light.(Photo by Robin)

to the world. It starts with inner peace and works its way to world peace. He proposes “harmony” as a precious universal value that allows one to transcend the self towards the greater good, and asserts that “money, wealth and love” are nothing without harmony (Hsing Yun, *365 Days for Travelers: Wisdom from Chinese Literary and Buddhist Classics* 2015a, p.320). The claim of this international Buddhist leader has been proven by research on group practice of Transcendental Meditation. Collective meditation practices, which builds inner peace in individuals, have resulted in fewer traffic accidents, reduction in violence, increase in optimism and greater order in Israel and Lebanon in 1983 (Orme-Johnson et al. 1988).

Meditation is not the only way to further the goals of the society. Diligent work can also build a prosperous nation. In a youth conference in 1997, Venerable Master Hsing Yun recommends youths to work hard to acquire wealth morally (right livelihood), value work to be a form of service and cultivation (rather than for material ends only), and to generously contribute towards charitable and religious causes (Chandler 2004, p.96). Work becomes practice because industry at work focuses the mind in the same way as meditation, and

service to liberate others avoids one's tendency towards selfish enlightenment (Chandler 2004, p.97). Such diligence in turn helps build a nation. Venerable Master Hsing Yun believes that only a prosperous nation is able to strengthen its defense, raise its standards of education, increase the standard of living, and encourage the cultivation of virtues among its people (Hsing Yun, *Buddhist View on Economic Issues*. 2005, p.315). A strong advocate of co-existence, Venerable Master Hsing Yun urges nations to co-operate to actualize world peace and the wellbeing of humanity. Hence, Buddhist teachings do not contradict national objectives but can support a country's agendas.

2.4 Summary

Schumacher's human-centred, Payutto's harmonious happiness, Magnuson's mindful and Chang's wisdom-based Buddhist economic models are by no means exhaustive. They represent a range of ideals that build on Buddhist principles but these cannot be put into practice without education and re-training. It is unlikely and impractical that any Buddhist economic model can replace the well-entrenched standards of either free market economies or centrally planned socialist communities (Guruge 2008, p.103). There is no need to: Buddhists do not frown upon economic success that alleviates suffering. In the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, the Buddha recognizes that wealth, when ethically obtained, leads to "four sources of worldly happiness: economic security, having enough to spend generously on oneself and others, the peace of mind that accompanies freedom from debt, and the peace of mind of knowing that one has earned one's wealth blamelessly (A II 62)" (Ash, *Do Our Economic Choices Make Us Happy?* 2011, p.118). The problem only arises if one clings to the wealth with greed.

To achieve sustainable harmony or equilibrium (a goal of both Buddhists and economists), practice should start from the personal level. Mosini notes that classical economists defined equilibrium as selfish individuals achieving harmonious outcome with political, social and moral order (Mosini 2007, p.1). While neo-classical economics referred to the equilibrium of supply and demand of commodities, they also recognized that any disturbance to the system would lead to a tendency back to (harmonious) equilibrium. In the *Mahāyana*

Awakening of Faith, bodhisattva⁶ are reminded to remain unchanged within the flow of fluctuating conditions. Treating diligent work as a form of service for the benefit of the society-at-large, one will avoid the dangers of greed-motivated decisions. Mutual thoughtfulness and respect will build strength and prosperity, from the family through the nation to the world. Hence, harmonious co-existence is the common goal of both Buddhist and economic enterprises.

3. Economics in the Buddhist World

3.1 Buddhist Teachings Meet Contemporary Economics in the Sanctuary

This section explores an alternative paradigm that is in part based on abundance economics and the gift economy where the “commodity” is merit or endless human virtues. Progress is now measured in more intangible terms where the harmony of individual self-interests may be achieved in today’s market mechanism. Noted economists such as Adam Smith, Karl Marx, Thorstein Veblen, John Keynes, and more recent thinkers such as R. H. Tawney, John A. Hobson and Eric Zimmerman taught “abundance economics” where everyone has abundant healthcare, nutrition, education, transportation, recreation, housing, self-expression, and personal security (Peach and Dugger 2006). Leaving the academic debate that ensues aside, the economy of abundance brings about a paradigm shift that can enable a movement from competition to collaboration, from self-interest to shared-interest, and from greed to generosity. At a mental level, the Buddhist philosophy of formlessness, selflessness and desirelessness assumes an abundant world that is inexhaustible, boundless and infinite (Hsing Yun, *Humanistic Buddhism: Holding true to the original intents of Buddha* 2016, p.30). *Sūtras*⁷ are filled with such awe-inspiring

6. A bodhisattva is a “Buddhist practitioner intent on the attainment of enlightenment based on profoundly altruistic motivations” (Muller, Bodhisattva, 2013). Two distinguishing features of bodhisattvas are their realization of the empty nature of all mundane phenomena (hence, impermanence and interdependence) and their deep compassion for the suffering of all beings. These characteristics drive bodhisattvas to practice the six perfections of endless generosity, discipline, tolerance, perseverance, mindful concentration and *prajñā* wisdom.

7. *Sūtras* are Buddhist canonical texts.

cosmic scenes of mental constructs. Buddhists believe in the power of the mind, that is, the abundance and infinity that can be construed through the mind can be turned into physical possibilities.

The notion of abundance precedes a gift economy. Today, the internet and MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) are well-known examples. In gift economies, goods and services are exchanged without explicit agreement upon a *quid pro quo* (Lillington 2006, p.7). The assumption of abundance is an important motivator. Another is that in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world, friendship is better than money. A piece of Brazilian popular adage says “a friend on the market is better than money in your pocket” (De L’Estoile 2014, p.62). Of course, we shall also be careful not to simplify the relationship to friends are better than money.

The idea of “gift” naturally brings to mind Mauss’ thesis that every gift is part of a system of reciprocity, or that there is not a free (altruistic) gift (Mauss 1990, p.ix). Mauss argues that stability comes from exchanges to create mutual interests and satisfactions in a so-called civilized world (Mauss 1990, p.106). Unfortunately, this argument creates tensions for the Buddhist sangha (monastic community).

The sustenance of the Buddhist sangha depends on the contribution of laity or householders. In the simplest model, monastics work towards their own salvation but also teach/serve the world. Lay devotees offer to monastics food, medicine, clothing and shelter as well as donation towards building or restoring religious buildings (Coderey 2005, p.405). Such *dāna* (offering) is meritorious. Hence, the donor can expect better rebirths as well as better karma in this life. While there is not supposed to be any expectation of reciprocity in such religious exchanges, that is practically not so. Based on Mauss’



A “gift economy” represents an attitude to life, a sharing of generosity and kindness.

observation, a bond is created between the recipient and donor through the gift. This bond exists through the expectation of some return, possibly intangible such as *punya* (merit). Buddhist *punya* is the cause of wholesome karma and is often associated with virtue, fortune and goodness (Muller, Merit, 2010), while merit builds religious capital for Buddhist adherents. Having considered the ethical consequences of each action mindfully and wisely, each action becomes the cause for a better future. Hence, gifts (material or otherwise) made in the present serve as investment for the growth of one's meritorious religious capital. It is the growth of such intangible, inexhaustible capital that Buddhism encourages rather than economic growth at the expense of non-renewable resources. Furthermore, meritorious religious capital can co-exist in any economy.

Punya has given Buddhist communities economic momentum. While the *Adbhutadharmaparyāya Sūtra* assures monastics that the accumulation of merits can lead to the extermination of all defilements leading to Buddhahood, the *Drumakinnararājaparipṛcchā Sūtra* confirms that lay practitioners can accumulate merits for divine protection. Furthermore, merits can be dedicated to someone else, known as *parīṇāma* (merit transfer). Technically, this means turning around one's "good roots and virtues of one's own religious practices" and directing them to somewhere else (Kawamura and Kawamura 1991, p.149). In the *Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra*, a person transfers the merits of practicing wholesome deeds, upholding vegetarian fasts, erecting *stūpas* and images, feeding the sangha, and supporting the monastery to the vow of rebirth in an Amitabha Buddha's pure land. In the Mahāyana spirit, the purpose of such dedication was for the benefit of all suffering beings (Wong 2012, p.202). The *Avatamsaka Sūtra* tells of great enlightening beings who dedicate roots of goodness by wishing all sentient beings to be purified and filled with inexhaustible and indestructible virtues so that they may "rest securely on innumerable great foundations of goodness, to be forever free of poverty, to be fully equipped with seven kinds of wealth—faith, self-control, shame, conscience, learning, generosity and wisdom" (Cleary 1984, p.533). There are many reasons to present gifts to the sangha.

The preceding description seems to reinforce Mauss' observation that

people give for the sake of reciprocal benefits, which can be larger than the original gift. However, more recent works by Testart (2013) and Florence Weber (Weber 2012) recognize that the obligation to reciprocate, especially with some “thing” of a higher value, is not universal (Sihlé 2015, p.353). Buddhism teaches a higher order of giving that is based on the non-substantiality of the act of giving, that is, the donor, beneficiary and gift are intrinsically empty. In the *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* (better known as the *Diamond Sūtra*), “a bodhisattva should practice giving without abiding in form, nor should he give abiding in sound, smell, taste, touch or dharmas” (Hsing Yun, *Four Insights for Finding Fulfillment* 2012, p.91). Practitioners are advised to give without attachment to phenomena, ideas or outward appearances and not to discriminate who to give to and what to give. Only such giving will have limitless merit. The family is an example of such a gift. Parents offer unconditioned love to their children. Buddhists are not the only ones who believe that the care parents provide to their children is immeasurable, and in Buddhist parlance, worthy of limitless merit.

A question naturally arises about giving to the sangha. Although Buddhist texts label the sangha an incomparable merit field, economists may not agree with how much a group of renounced labor can contribute to the mainstream economic engine. Stereotypes picture monastic communities as cloisters of monks and nuns in solitary devotion, being parasitically dependent on laity for their material wellbeing. Such monastics are believed to be socially withdrawn. However, not all sangha members belong in cloistered communities. Ash confirms that a sangha can be “productive” because the Dharma taught makes those actually engaged in the workforce more trustworthy (reducing transaction costs and sustaining trade), and encourages co-operative ventures (reducing the costs of doing business) (Ash, *The Monastic Sangha: “An incomparable field of merit” and wealth creators?* 2006, p.218). Buddhism can continue to serve humanity by ensuring the progress is not only measured by economic growth. People can transcend their limits of self-centredness. Hence, *dāna* is an effective gift as long as the virtuous monastics practice and teach. If done well, spiritual and material wellbeing will go hand-in-hand.

3.2 Practice in Sacred Communities

The aforementioned system of offering and merit has operated in Buddhist communities for over two thousand years. However, when it encounters modern economics, this system faces some challenges. There is a distinction between those brought up in a culture where Buddhist gift-giving is embedded and those living in urban environments coming into contact with Buddhism. While the ideal Buddhist gift is an act of asymmetrical and unreciprocated generosity, the predisposition to give without being asked is marker of Buddhist virtue and faith that only those growing up in such cultures appreciate (Cagle 2015, pp.467–468). Below are a variety of models that show how sangha communities sustain themselves in the modern world, given these economic dichotomies.

Campergue surveyed over 290 Tibetan dharma centers in France to determine the western perspective of the Buddhist gifting practice. Unfamiliar with the traditional Buddhist practice of merit, adaptations have resulted in commodification of Dharma teachings as seen in the high costs of retreats, conferences and teachings (Campergue 2015, p.449). These centers collected donations, offerings, and teaching fees. Westerners were willing to make monetary and other donations to their masters for alleviating their personal health or other existential issues, a practice that some center administrators labelled as *upaya* (skillful means) for the promotion of the Dharma (Campergue 2015, pp.451–453). The Dharma encounters turned transactional in an environment unfamiliar with the concepts of *dāna* and *punya*.

Myanmar, a Buddhist country, presents a case study that represents the other end of the spectrum. The concepts of *dāna* and *punya* were so much a part of the nation's culture that they were used in the traditional healing sector whereby donations were offered to healers. Traditional healers (monks, diviners, spirit mediums, exorcists, and traditional specialists of indigenous medicine) in the central Rakhine state present their services freely as tokens of loving kindness and generosity. Their healing is perceived as a form of *dāna* guided by Buddhist texts (Coderey 2005, p.407). Patients present voluntary donations in return for the service to avoid being in an inferior position of indebtedness and to acquire karmic merit (Coderey 2005, p.418). The healer is rated according to his loving kindness, while the patient is seen as the one who is fortunate enough

to show his or her respect and gratitude through a meritorious donation which contributes to the efficacy of the healing session (Coderey 2005, p.419).

Although several dynasties in China's long history adopted Buddhism as a state religion, gifting to temples in recent times represents a religion in flux. The Buddhist temple economy has been influenced by the capitalist model (Wang 2006, p.251). For example, several temples, such as Jing-an Temple in Shanghai, were dependent on real estate income in the Republic era. Many temple patrons were rich businessmen who helped to promote Buddhism through charitable, cultural and educational undertakings (Wang 2006, p.252). In a study of Chinese Buddhists frequenting Tibetan centers in China, two levels of financial transaction were seen: (1) gift devoid of any expectations of return; and (2) exchange in which a service is delivered (Caple 2015, p.476). The more faithful will give to the temple, leaving the natural karmic laws to determine intangible merit received, if any. Of course, the relationship is complex, with moral, economic, political and social interests and implications (Caple 2015, p.477). Whatever the sponsors' motivation or economic background might be, monastics claimed that they could put the funds to good use (Caple 2015, p.473), thereby generating wholesome karmic merit for all benefactors.

These examples are by no means exhaustive but serve to illustrate some of the issues encountered when tradition meets modernity. Buddhist economics take on new levels of innovation when applied within the sacred communities.

3.3 A Socially-Engaged Buddhist Economic Model

Buddhism is a practical religion. It was the traders who took Buddhism beyond its birthplace in India through the Silk Roads. Together with Buddhist relics, texts and images, the caravans also carried silk, precious gem and glass (Lancaster 2006, p.41). The Buddha did not advise his lay disciples to give up worldly activities; instead, he advised them to combine economic and spiritual values for the sake of maximizing all round benefit, for the individual and the society (Balachandran 2006). In this form of engaged Buddhism, wealth, both tangible and intangible (such as wisdom and virtues), play an important role. Stability and harmony in society arise from equality and fair distribution of wealth.

One form of socially-engaged Buddhism promoted in China, first by Master Taixu (1890–1947) and now practiced by Venerable Master Hsing Yun and others, is seen as the Buddhist response to the changing Chinese economic climate. Humanistic Buddhism reflects the values of self-development and active engagement in society, while restoring the conscience (Buddha nature) lost through commercial competition (Wang 2006, pp.258–259). Instead of engaging in consumerism or hoarding, these Buddhists are taught that they truly possess wealth when their money is put to good use. In this model, Buddhist congregations spend their wealth and effort on educational, cultural, religious and/or charitable enterprises. The wealth of these temples come from pooled resources (which include talents and time). The positive affinities built from the investment of their resources in turn become part of their merit field, as a matter of course.

This merit field represents religious, social, moral and spiritual capital. Selfless bodhisattvas contribute to this merit field with no expectation of returns. This new paradigm is rather different from goal-oriented capitalists who invest to earn positive dividends and increase asset value for their stakeholders. Instead, Buddhist *sūtras* are filled with teachings that infinite merits can be gained without the intention of reaping rewards.

To illustrate, let us look at Fo Guang Shan, a curious economic miracle. Chandler argues that Fo Guang Shan encourages behavioral patterns conducive to capitalist enterprises (Chandler 2004, p.5). Its founder, Venerable Master Hsing Yun, has built over two hundred temples and set up art galleries, libraries, publishing houses, bookstores, television, tea houses, mobile clinics, orphanages, senior homes, Buddhist colleges, and universities worldwide (Hsing Yun, *Hear Me Out: Messages from a humble monk* 2015b, p.xi). Venerable Master Hsing Yun is keen to ensure that his Buddhist sangha contributes positively to economic and social wellbeing. When asked how a monk with no assets in the beginning managed to build a multinational monastic enterprise, Venerable Master Hsing Yun often said that he only knew how to manage his own mind. In 2015, he published his economic wisdom based on Buddhist principles in *Hear Me Out: Message from a humble monk*. His tenets of wisdom related to economics include “nothing is mine; everything is public property,”

“enjoy poverty, a different type of happiness,” and “settling with simplicity, a confident manager of money” (Hsing Yun, *Hear Me Out: Messages from a humble monk* 2015b, pp.16– 18). Venerable Master Hsing Yun declares that it is not in his nature to accumulate wealth or possessions, but rather is always happy to share with others (Hsing Yun, *Hear Me Out: Messages from a humble monk* 2015b, p.21). In fact, he constantly invests to expand the scope of his activities without any accumulation, “accepting money with one hand and immediately giving it away with the other” (Chandler 2004, p.235). For example, donors may offer a fortune for one piece of his calligraphy, but Venerable Master Hsing Yun did not have access to even a dollar because the entire sum of donation would immediately be deposited into one of his educational and cultural foundations.

Since the Venerable Master did not complete primary education, he taught himself on-the-job. Although he did not know the textbook versions of successful business models, he had a clear mission to awaken people from their destructive worldview and habits when he edited a Buddhist magazine *Awaken the World* in the 1950s. His motivation was never financial nor for himself. He was nevertheless a pragmatic and entrepreneurial monk. He supports capitalism because it provides opportunities to those who are industrious (Chandler 2004, p.92). To Venerable Master Hsing Yun, economic activity can be beneficial to self-cultivation if the service and resources help others (Chandler 2004, p.92). Fo Guang Shan expands itself continuously in noteworthy causes, believing that financing will come later (Chandler 2004, p.103). According to Chandler, monastic life has been transformed into a paragon of entrepreneurial spirit (Chandler 2004, pp.103–104):

Foguang clerics exemplify the capitalist work spirit at its very best: they are a highly organized, diligent labor force, remaining frugal in personal life, but daring to expand the horizons of the “occupation.” Most important, the dualism between secular occupation and religious cultivation collapses: to practice Buddhist teachings is to serve others productively, and any beneficial service is an expression of Dharma.

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Fo Guang Shan presents an interesting case whereby religious symbols and resources foster a fruitful interaction between capitalism and the Buddhist Dharma (Chandler 2004, p.94). Instead of avoiding the seductive power of wealth and worldly possessions, Venerable Master Hsing Yun sees the endless possibilities for improving the human condition through prudent financial management (Chandler 2004, p.104). Donations are well-utilized (and hence, meritorious) if they serve a larger and longer-term purpose. Education and culture are the most difficult financially but the most meritorious in terms of building moral, social and spiritual capital for the society. Take for example, Fo Guang Shan Nan Tien Temple in Wollongong, Australia. Devotees, volunteers and visitors generously donate time and material goods to support the cultural, educational, charitable and missionary causes of the Temple. As a result, Nan Tien Temple gave Australia its first accredited institution of higher education based on Buddhist values and wisdom. Nan Tien Institute is made possible by the “reinvestment” of donations and alms towards higher education. Both Nan Tien Temple and Nan Tien Institute run programs to encourage mindfulness, ethics and sustainability. Not only did these institutions not shy away from the economic engine of the day, but they participated fully in the process for the benefit of the society-at-large.

Whatever the motivation of the donors, socially-engaged temples put these gifts to use for the greater good. In a recent analysis of 801 wish cards collected



Nan Tien Institute

from Nan Tien Temple in December 2015, 58% of adults prayed for good health, 21% happiness, 18% peace and 17% career. A similar pattern can be seen among children: 42% health, 24% happiness and 18% peace. These wholesome wishes were dedicated primarily to the self (57% of adults and 79% of children) and to the family (63% of adults and 50% of children). Interestingly, only 38% of children writing in English dedicated their wishes to their family while 75% of Chinese children messages did so. Among the adults, they are rather balanced at 64% English and 62% Chinese. This “reality check” demonstrates that most people seek merit for self-centred purposes. Only a few children wished for “world peace.” It was unlikely that these patrons cared very much about how their *dāna* went towards the development of Nan Tien Institute or other noble causes. They were contented with the fact that the Temple would “invest” their *dāna* in meritorious activities so that their prayers could be “answered.” Knowingly or unknowingly, the act of giving has created a causal network of partnerships stemming from the individual onto the world.

3.4 Summary

The Buddhist sangha is continually looking for ways to sustain itself in a world that seems less and less dependent on a community of virtuous representatives of Truth. Ominously (for the sangha), the Oxford English Dictionary named “post-truth⁸” as the word of the year in 2016, which among other things, imply that a selected few who claim to know the “truth” and have access to the mechanisms to promulgate such knowledge own the right to impose this truth on others (Saul 1995, p.24). This is opposed to Buddhism that believes in ultimate equality: that everyone owns the Buddha Nature (the Truth). In addition, humanity seems to be losing its struggle to the darker side of self-destructive self-interest (Saul 1995, p.35). Not only are we uninterested in public good, we are also not interested in confronting reality. Grasping the way things really are is the crucial step toward happiness (Greenblatt 2011, p.199) and that includes understanding that the universe is not all about us and

8. According to the Oxford Living Dictionaries, “post-truth” is “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotional and personal belief”.

our destiny (Greenblatt 2011, p.238). Perhaps the cause of disinterest with and competing distractions against supporting the Sangha may also be the very reason to sustain the diminishing guardians and practitioners of Buddhism.

The economics of the Buddhist sangha presents an interesting case study: a community of dedicated monks and/or nuns living on minimum desires but still dependent on others for sustenance. This dependence, in turn, generates a positive application of the Dharma. Buddhist merit is measured by the extent of one's altruism: how far-reaching the benefits are to others and into the future. Merit is also accrued when one does not require "return on investment." Trust the natural laws of karma to return wholesome effects eventually to the entire system (of which the individual is a part). Hence, every kind deed, word or thought is an investment towards a Pure Land on earth for the self and others.

The vision of selfless bodhisattvas building a meritorious Pure Land together for future generations is still an ideal. In reality, many temple patrons wish for personal and family wellbeing. Education is the key to shifting paradigms, worldviews and value systems. Supporting the shift has to be communities of practice to build new habits. Mindful habits at the personal level can extend to peaceful interaction with family and friends; collaborative community-building can lead to social harmony and world peace. The Buddhist sangha, such as Fo Guang Shan, can be an example in generating positive socio-economic impact through spiritual practices in human enterprises.

4. Conclusion: Path to Co-operative Harmony

Buddhist and western economic paradigms are not necessarily conflicting. They propose different measures and paths to help humanity be happier. While Buddhists focus on mental/spiritual attributes, western economics emphasize the tangible. However, neither system denies the existence of other attributes. Increasingly, scientific studies are confirming much of the benefits of Buddhist practices of altruism, mindfulness and ethics.

The Buddha did not invent the laws of karma, dependent co-origination, nor the empty, impermanent nature of all things. He discovered these natural laws of being as well as how the human mind trapped itself in a relentless cycle of tension. Attachment to sensory pleasures is a form of (self-centred) greed and

will inevitably lead to unwholesome result. Buddhist training involves mindful contemplation of conditions leading to the reality of the present, followed by the practice of contributing to the economy altruistically and compassionately for co-operative harmony. Hence, economic progress is intended to serve the nation, and national progress will serve every individual. Ideally, humanity makes progress spiritually and materially through this positive cycle of virtues.

Living in a complex world, we should be careful to identify the weeds from the grass, and apply the right herbicide. We may draw some lessons from Saul who points out that a “knowing” person advances carefully, recognizing that what he or she knows is only a fraction of the larger picture, whereas a specialized, technocratic elite is dangerously “shielded by childlike certainty” (Saul 1995, p.5). In humanity’s zest to overturn blind faith, superstitions and pessimism of tradition, modernity has promoted progress by mastering nature and expanding economic output (Cohen et al. 2011). The perils of modern commerce is that humans are treated as means to an end, and hence, people feel manipulated, exploited or maneuvered (Klein 2012, p.28). Science and ego have taken over religion and the tradition of volunteerism. The sense of community has become about rights rather than service. Self-righteousness and hostility inevitably increase.

Eradicating the weed that has grown stronger over time is not going to be effortless nor quick. It will take the injection of much healthy grass and other ingredients to strengthen the soil. Such cultivation on the mind is not a luxury, but a matter of necessity and urgency. The modern consciousness emphasizes human concerns; humanistic Buddhism adds to that dialogue a reminder for compassionate activities within this human sphere in response to timeless human needs. Sustainable happiness of a community in harmony requires co-operation rather than competition. The path to co-operative harmony can take place in one’s personal, work and community life, with every action taken, speech made and thought generated. Many Buddhist leaders and communities have engaged society to demonstrate possible ways to minimize one’s self-centred needs as the origin of economic relationships. It begins with one opening up one’s heart to the needs and conditions of others (human beings, as well as all animate and inanimate things), beyond theory into practice.