

# BUDDHISM AND GLOBAL ECONOMIC JUSTICE

*Medagoda Sumanatissa*

The central problem today is that we are long past the time when "human activities and their effects can be neatly compartmentalised within nations, within sectors (energy, agriculture, trade) and within broad areas of concern (environmental, economic, social). These compartments have begun to dissolve."<sup>1</sup> It is claimed that "this applies in particular to the various global 'crises' that have seized public concern, particularly over the past decade. These are not separate crises: an environmental crisis, a development crisis and an energy crisis. They are all one."<sup>2</sup>

## **Poverty of Growth**

In short, it is a crisis of the relation of humankind to its environment both in regard to the present and the future. Part of the reason for the present and emerging crises is humankind's ideological confrontation which finds its basis in craving (*tanha*). If the worst effects of these multiple crises are to be averted, it is essential to identify both their causes and the steps for their solution. On a world scale it is stated that industrial production has grown more than fiftyfold over the past century with "four-fifths of the growth [having taken place] since 1950."<sup>3</sup> Despite this enormous expansion in production, partly due to

increased consumption and war-expenditures besides arms production, the scale of poverty and the numbers affected by destitution have increased. According to estimates of the International Labour Organization, in 1977 "more than seven hundred million people live[d] in acute poverty and [were] destitute."<sup>4</sup> Besides, "countless millions suffer from debilitating diseases of various sorts and lack access to the most basic medical services. . . . The tragic waste of human resources in the Third World is symbolized by nearly three thousand million persons unemployed or underemployed in the mid-1970s."<sup>5</sup> In such a situation, the urgency of eliminating or at least mitigating the worst effects of such economic injustices assume considerable importance.

### **Righteous Universal Rule: Its Earliest Exposition**

In Buddhism there are many relevant points which could inform processes for solving human poverty and economic injustice. It was the conception of the Buddha that the Middle Path could serve as the way for both material and spiritual progress, its applicability having relevance to personal liberation from suffering, with application by extension to the national and global context.<sup>6</sup> Among the Buddha's discourses relevant to this problem is the "Discourse on the Lion's Roar of a Universal Monarch" (*Chakkavatti Sihanada Suttanta*).

If among the problems of today, the arms race and wasteful military expenditures constitute the biggest stumbling block to a more liberal sharing of financial and material resources globally, it is interesting to note that this sutta envisions a universal monarch who wins over a kingdom and expands his domain by righteous means without recourse to the force of arms or intrigue. In this context "righteous means" describes the pursuit of the welfare of all without the violation of anyone's rights. The concept of justice that inspires this universal monarch or ruler entails providing every being, human and animal, righteous

protection while also eliminating all injustice. The universal monarch should seek advice, especially from those leading morally good lives, on how to ameliorate such grave problems as destitution, for its very existence is a form of injustice. In the Buddha's vision, economic progress and stability of humankind should not be secured for their own sake, but towards ensuring the moral and spiritual progress of humankind. The Buddha's "Discourse on the Lion's Roar of a Universal Monarch" also explains how singling out material progress alone can lead to social disorder and moral decay with consequences such as an increase in crime and a degeneration of the quality of life. Today the truth of this is evident in the "developed" countries. "The more industrialized and developed is a country, the higher the level of criminality and vice versa."<sup>7</sup>

### **Dangers of Tunnel Vision**

It is interesting to recall what a celebrated economist like Lord Keynes said in the 1930s, speculating on the "economic possibilities for our grandchildren." He stated, "For at least another hundred years, we must pretend to ourselves and to everyone that fair is foul and foul is fair: for foul is useful and fair is not. Avarice and usury and precaution must be our gods for a little longer still. For only they can lead us out of the tunnel of economic necessity into daylight."<sup>8</sup>

The single-minded evaluation of developmental growth measured in terms of Gross National Product cannot possibly go on unlimited. The relentless pursuit of economic goals regardless of environmental as well as moral considerations has resulted in almost a pathological growth of sensualist trends. An example from the developed countries is that in the U.K., the U.S.A. and France, not to mention the USSR, alcoholism has assumed the proportions of a major health problem. In some of these as well as others, the drug addiction problem has become acute, especially among the youth.<sup>9</sup>

### **Conscientiousness in Resource Use**

In Buddhism excessive acquisitive greed and hoarding of money or possessions is deplored. Frugality is encouraged as a positive virtue. Once, Ven. Ananda Thero explained to a king how gifts offered to bhikkhus are put to maximum use. The extent to which resource conservation was practiced in early times is illustrated by the multiple uses to which discarded robes were put. Discarded robes were used as coverlets, as mattress covers, as rugs, thereafter as dusters and finally kneaded with clay and used to repair cracked walls and floors of temples.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast, today there is an increase in marketing of particularly non-essential products. This growth results in a phenomenal increase in resource consumption. One of the most environmentally damaging has been the large-scale destruction of forests, especially the tropical forests. The scale of resource consumption can be illustrated by North America's consumption of world resources, which within a matter of forty years has equalled the level of what humankind had consumed during the last four thousand years.<sup>11</sup>

### **Material and Spiritual Growth can be Conjoined**

It is a Buddhist idea that the state of nature was contaminated by the concept of private property. The modern idea of social contract has its roots in Buddhism. In the Buddha's "Discourse on the Establishment of the Principle of Righteousness" (*Dhammachakkapavattana Sutta*), the Buddha's views on religion, economics and society can be discerned.<sup>12</sup> The Noble Eightfold Path includes the cultivation and development of right understanding, right mindedness, right speech, right action, right living, right effort, right attentiveness and right concentration. Understood in a comprehensive manner their purpose is to inculcate a moral life to be adopted by both householders and by those who have renounced lay life for advanced spiritual development.

The Buddha's "Discourse on the Knowledge of the Beginning" (Agganna Suttanta) can be understood as an attempt to deal with the fourfold caste system which relates the speculative story of the "fall of man."<sup>13</sup> The Buddha made provision for a communal set up for monks and nuns. Apart from the eight items of personal use such as clothing, the begging bowl, and so on, all other items are considered the property of the commune (*sangha*). This system was introduced for the regulation of the affairs of the *sangha* exclusively. However, this practice is not without value, by way of example, for lay society. More universally applied, however, was the abolition of social inequality by the Buddha by introducing equality among the *sangha*, the bhikkhu community, irrespective of the origins of its members by way of caste or rank before entering the Order. Buddhism all along upheld a principle which Karl Marx declared as follows: "to vindicate the simple laws of morals and justice which ought to govern the regulations of private individuals as the rules paramount to the intercourse of nations."<sup>14</sup> This constituted part of the Principles of Rulership which Buddhist rulers were enjoined to follow. Given the current crisis situation and the relative failure of contemporary economic approaches to the solution of the problems of poverty and economic justice, it may be desirable to examine the Buddhist framework to see if there is a Buddhist way of placing development on a more dynamic and meaningful foundation.<sup>15</sup>

### **Buddhist Economics for Full Employment**

E.P. Schumacher, writing on "Buddhist Economics," stated that since "'Right Livelihood' is one of the requirements of the Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path . . . there must be such a thing as Buddhist Economics." He held, for example, that "the Buddhist point of view takes the function of work to be at least threefold: to give a man a chance to utilise and develop his faculties; to enable him to overcome his ego-centredness by joining with

other people in a common task; and to bring forth the goods and services needed for a becoming existence."<sup>16</sup>

It is especially noteworthy that in the pursuit of Right Livelihood what is enjoined is the practice of blameless and honourable occupation. Forms of employment involving trade in armaments (*sattha vanijja*), slaves (*satta vanijja*), intoxicants and narcotics (*majje vanijja*) and poisons (*visa vanijja*) are to be avoided.<sup>17</sup>

If achievement of full employment is one basis for accomplishing global economic justice, "the very start of Buddhist economic planning would be planning for full employment . . . for everyone who needs an 'outside' job. It would not be the maximization of employment, nor the maximization of production. . . . While the materialist is mainly interested in goods, the Buddhist is mainly interested in liberation" and the path is to be traversed along the "middle way" eschewing the extremes of material comfort-seeking and mortification of the human body. Schumacher further held that the "marvel of the Buddhist way of life is the utter rationality of the pattern of amazingly small means leading to extraordinarily satisfactory results."<sup>18</sup>

More than expenditure for the advancement of human welfare, it is the waste on armaments that has contributed greatly to the debt and inflation problems that plague the world today and doubtless will become increasingly intolerable in the future. This is aggravated by the ecological deficits that will further endanger the prospect of human survival.<sup>19</sup> It needs to be emphasized that the "social philosophy of the Buddha is grounded on the basic concept of the fundamental oneness and unity of humankind. Buddhist social ethics therefore has a universal appeal which gaily transcends all geographic, ethnic and temporal barriers. . . . The fundamental teachings of the Buddha, with their universal and timeless appeal and validity

constitute the structure of Buddhist culture. . . . The Buddha has emphasized the inseparable connection between ethics and politics and the desirability of conducting public life in a manner consistent with moral values."<sup>20</sup>

Today's situation does substantiate to a considerable extent the analysis of the causality of suffering in society as propounded in the Chakkavatti *Sihanada Suttanta*, already referred to. The realisation should dawn upon us before it is too late that the proper development of society requires that "economic socialism must necessarily harmonise itself with political democracy, so that both could together provide the freedoms and liberties for the realisation of the ultimate aims of individual betterment and perfection."<sup>21</sup> Buddhist economics and politics together, consistently applied and in conjunction with Buddhist ethics, can help uplift human society from its present predicament.

### **Needs: Early Re-Structuring of Global Systems**

As the World Commission on Environment and Development pointed out in the report *Our Common Future*, the next few decades are crucial. "The time has come to break out of past patterns. Attempts to maintain social and ecological stability through old approaches to development and environmental protection will increase instability. Security must be sought through change. . . . Yet we are aware that such a reorientation on a continuing basis is surely beyond the reach of the present decision-making structures and institutional arrangements both national and international."<sup>22</sup>

The task of national and international leadership is to plan to fill this void. Although there are no universal monarchs today as envisioned in the Buddha's "Discourse on the Lion's Roar of a Universal Monarch" some advice given by the retiring universal

monarch to his successor may have a moral for the rulers of today. It included the message:

Soon those ascetics and priests in your kingdom who have abstained from intoxicants, who are established in forbearance and truthfulness, each of whom tames himself, appeases himself, them you should approach from time to time with the questions: 'What Sir, is good? What is bad? What is blameworthy? What should be cultivated? What should not be cultivated? What action of mine will contribute to illfare and suffering for long? What action of mine, on the contrary, will contribute to welfare and happiness forever?' Having heard from them, you should completely avoid what is bad and adopt and practice what is good. This, son, is the duty of a universal monarch.<sup>23</sup>

Buddhism encourages the observance of ethical and moral values in practical life. Apart from the observance of the Five Precepts (*pancha sila*) which constitute the minimum moral obligation of the lay Buddhist, there is the general advocacy of the practice of charity (*dana*), discipline (*sila*) and meditation (*dhavana*); all this is not to the exclusion of the pursuit of personal happiness for the laity which includes enjoyment of judiciously or honestly earned wealth. Detailed expositions of these matters, as applicable to the life of the laity, are also dealt with in a number of discourses of the Buddha. Some of these include blessings (*Mangala Sutta*; *Sutta Nipata* II.4); advice on domestic and social relations (*Sigala Sutta*, *Digha Nikaya* No. 31); universal love (*Metta Sutta*, *Sutta Nipata* 1.8) and the expositions of the path to socioeconomic progress (*Kutadanta Sutta*, *Digha Nikaya*, Part I).

A point that needs stressing, however, is that: "The materialist view of life admits of no absolute ethical principles.



As this non-religious or actively anti-religious influence gains ground, the concept of ethics as being a matter of mere expediency spreads along with it. In this way the collapse of religious values has exposed us to the greatest danger in modern times, the subjugation of the individual and the rights to the requirements of materialistic state policies."<sup>24</sup>

### **Union of State Law and Moral Law**

On the contemporary relevance of Buddhist approaches to modern problems, Professor K.N. Jayatillake has stated: "This philosophy of the Buddha comprehends a theory of knowledge, a theory of reality, an ethical system, a social and political philosophy as well as suggestions of philosophy of law and international relations. A careful examination of the essentials of these aspects of its philosophy show that they are interrelated and interconnected."<sup>25</sup>

In one of his prophetic writings, the Japanese Buddhist saint Nichiren predicted, that "the union of state law and Buddhist truth shall be established . . . and the moral law (*kaiho*) will be achieved in the actual life of mankind."<sup>26</sup>

Even if the concept of a universal monarch is not a reality today, as far as world institutions go, the United Nations is an apex world body.

The hopes for humankind must lie in the greatest strengthening of this world body or through its possible re-constitution so that such a world organization can play a meaningfully effective role in the emerging "global village" where national frontiers lose significance and where humankind in interpersonal and collective relations will act in greater harmony for advancing the "common future" in a spirit of fellowship, understanding and goodwill while conveying a spirit of universal love and paying due regard to moral values of

perennial significance to all. Perhaps, under such circumstances, national rivalries as they exist today can be submerged and the establishment of a world where economic justice prevails can be made a reality.

## NOTES

1. World Commission on Environment, *Our Common Future* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 4.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. International Labour Office, *Meeting Basic Needs: Strategies for Eradicating Mass Poverty and Unemployment* (Geneva, 1977), p. 1.
5. Ibid.
6. David J. Kalupahana, "The Socio-Economic Thought in Buddhism." In *The Young Buddhist* (Singapore, The Buddhist Oasis, 1984), p. 207.
7. M.K. Singh, "Economic Development and Crime." In *The Other Side of Development: Social and Psychological Implications*, ed., K.S. Shukla (New Delhi: Sage Publishers, 1987), p. 89.
8. E.F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 24.
9. Lily de Silva, "Sensualist Social Trends and Buddhism in Modern Times." In *The Young Buddhist*.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Socio-Economic Thought in Buddhism (*Dhammachakkapavattana Sutta, Samyutta Nikaya*).
13. Socio-Economic Thought in Buddhism (*Agganna Suttanta, Nikaya*).
14. Anatoly Admoshin, "Doomed to Discord: Ideology and Foreign Policy." In *New Times* 28.3 (1989), p. 8.
15. H. N. Karunatilaka, *This Confused Society* (Sri Lanka: The Buddhist Information Centre, 1976), p.1.

*Buddhism and Global Economic Justice*

16. . Schumacher, op. cit., pp. 54-55. 17. Ibid. p. 58.
17. Ibid. p. 58.
18. Ibid. p. 58.
19. Lester R. Brown, *The State of the World* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1987), p. 1.
20. W. S. Karunaratne, "Man in Society: The Buddhist View." In *Buddhism: Its Religion and Philosophy* (Singapore: The Buddhist Research Society, 1988).
21. Ibid. p. 19.
22. World Commission on Environment, op. cit.
23. Socio-Economic Thought in Buddhism, op. cit.
24. Francis Story, *Buddhist Outlook* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publications Society, 1973), p. 175.
25. K. N. Jayatillake, *The Contemporary Relevance of Buddhism*, The Wheel Publication No. 258, (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publications Society, 1978), p. 5.
26. William Theodore de Bary, ed., *The Buddhist Tradition in India, China and Japan* (New York: Modern Library), p. 354.