

A Buddhist Approach to Economic Justice

The Buddha's teaching on socio-political issues has only lately begun to receive the attention it deserves. Buddhism's apparent quietism was what appealed to people in the West at first and it is as well to recognise the personal base on which its social vision is founded. That is that there cannot be social harmony without a strong individual ethical stance to maintain it. In other words, it does not rely on the authoritarian imposition of moral standards but on a grass-roots response to matters of common concern. The cultivation of social and economic justice must therefore develop out of a shared attitude of mind.

It was the nature of the Buddha's Enlightenment experience to have insight into the interdependence of all that lives. This is why compassion is one of the two cardinal virtues to which Buddhists aspire. The other virtue is wisdom, which acts as a counterbalance. Compassionate motivation is not enough without a grasp of the right means of action to meet any given situation. Again one sees that there is no imperative to impose one-size-fits-all solutions. Each case must be weighed individually.

While these virtues are the ultimate rule by which all actions are measured, others contribute to their development. Among these is generosity, which is seen as the first step towards social interaction and away from self-interest. It shares elements of both compassion and wisdom, in that an individual responds unconditionally to need but must also assess under what circumstances it has arisen and what action would be most appropriate to meet it.

Elsewhere the Buddha gives advice on creating harmony over a variety of interdependent relationships within society: husband/wife; parent/child; employer/employee; friends. Each of these includes provision for needs and financial accountability within them. Greed, on the other hand, is seen as a disturber of social harmony and meanness as a demeaning fault in character.

It so happens that the money economy was coming into existence in the 6th century BCE India of the Buddha's day and it figures in the religious imagery of his teaching. This is most evident in the concept of merit. The product of one's good deeds, which can be shared with others as well as having its effect after death on the following life, it obviously derives from the concept of credit transfer. Several millionaire merchants were among the Buddha's disciples and their way of business was obviously well known to him.

Local rulers also asked the Buddha's advice. Coming himself from a republican clan that elected its leaders, he favoured aspects of the democratic process in ordering monastic procedures among his own followers. Where the rulers were of absolutist tendency, as those of two of the most successful kingdoms with which he interacted were, then he taught them the duty to ensure free flow of the means of livelihood and of funds for trade as a sure way of guaranteeing a contented people in a prosperous realm.

In extrapolating now the Buddha's teaching as applied to the India of 26 centuries ago, we have to pay regard to why he gave the advice he did rather than wresting it as an absolute measure to fit the circumstances of our remote day. As we have seen in the Buddhist teaching on social micro-units, the duty of generosity is balanced by the corresponding duty of accountability. Simply dropping debt obviously does not address the whole problem since in many cases the inappropriate or irresponsible regimes that originally contracted them remain.

While it is true that the banks or governments concerned lacked a sense of responsibility in dealing with such regimes in the first place, to impose the solution of cancelling debt on them as a kind of punishment does not really help those who suffer as a result of the imprudence and improvidence on either side. Buddhist advice must always be the necessity of keeping before our minds the suffering of the people we have set out to help. If cancelling debt is appropriate in the circumstances and it only needs that for them to prosper, then that is the wise thing to do. In the different circumstances of what are called failing regimes, means must be found of providing for need without, at the same time, imposing colonialist solutions.

At the heart of Buddhism is the dilemma of individuals who are suffering. Alleviating that suffering wisely is its priority and must pay regard to all the circumstances and be adaptable to them.

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