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# Elements of Buddhist Economics

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Glen Alexandrin
*Villanova University, Villanova, Pennsylvania, USA*



## Introduction

As economists we can be interested in the application of economic ideas from Buddhist thought. This can be called Buddhist economics. Some of its aspects have been found in India but also in other countries including Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Japan and the USA. Buddhist economics is studied, developed and practised in Asian countries particularly in Sri Lanka and Burma. But it is also observed and studied as a part of the growing field of experimental economics by scholars in the USA (Diwan and Lutz, 1985).

Economic policy can use the tools of economics in its design, or any rational set of principles such as those outlined in operations research, but it will only be as meaningful as the ideas which it embodies and the objectives which it pursues.

In recent years much has appeared on Christian economics, Jewish economics and Islamic economics. In most of these instances there is an agreement that these studies of principles and objectives are either of historic interest or are totally experimental exercises (Pryor, 1985; Tregarthen, 1989). An exception to this rule may be the applied Christian economics in Latin America.

Buddhist economics, on the other hand, has been created "on demand". With independence in the traditionally Buddhist countries, following World War II, Buddhist politics, Buddhist constitutions, Buddhist central banking, Buddhist approaches to agricultural development and self-sufficiency, Buddhist housing policy were developed — "hands-on" Buddhist economics — was created.

The idea of Buddhist economics is ethical policy towards certain social and economic objectives. It is not quite aimed at creating an academic impression. This we see in the work of one of the best-known exponents of a Buddhist economics, Ernst Friedrich Schumacher. In his work we can see some of the methodological concepts dominating the creation of Buddhist economics: it is not a theory, it is a guide; it is not textual, it is to be developed by experimentation.

Thus, there are elements or ideas which underlie Buddhist economics. From these, Buddhist economic policy can be sensibly derived on demand and, eventually, a Buddhist economics, if needed.

## The Role of Ideas

We in the West are fortunate to have available the works of Hegel and of Marx. They both give us a lesson in applied Western logic. According to Hegel, it is ideas, doctrines — thought — which create and mould reality. Thus, in

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Philadelphia, we celebrated the bicentennial of the US Constitution. Lots of balloons proclaimed that the ideas of a few people created a society.

For Marx, it is the opposite. It is the material conditions — what you eat, where you work — which determine your thoughts and your actions. Thoughts are common and unexceptional to each socio-economic class. Actions will tend to fall in line with the general tenor of society and to support its continuation. Thus there was the Marxist policy of land reform in Nicaragua in 1979.

But, as we know, there is a spark of Hegel in Marx. For in Marx's work there is a group of thoughts which are creative of the new and of the revolutionary. They are the thoughts, described in the *Communist Manifesto*, which are exogenous to the movement of the capitalist system and can transform it. They are the thoughts of the enlightened proletariat.

Historically, the importance of ideas in creating a new reality has been widely accepted by economists. This is the foundation of belief in active economic policy, plans and forecasts. Our "ex-idol", Keynes, has written:

> The ideas of economists and political philosophers . . . are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men . . . are usually the slaves of some defunct economist (Keynes, 1954).

The principles, research interests and direction of economics are ruled by the expressions and the concepts which its "superstars" create, often unbeknownst to them. This has been true throughout time and space; these conceptualizers carry the Hegelian spark into the socio-economic/political sphere and have the "freedom" to express or create a new type of economics. To some extent, every economist determines what economics is, based on his own value system and on how he perceives reality.

## Ideas of Buddhism in Economics

The roots of Buddhist economics have been traced by scholars to the rock edits of Emperor Ashoka (Thayar, 1961) and to the *Precious Garland* of Nagarjuna at the dawn of our era (Nagarjuna and Gyatso, 1975). They go to the same material preconditions which led to Kautilia's masterpiece (Gard, 1949). We also have descriptive studies of Buddhist monastery finance, credit and loans, and land-leasing operations as these existed in the Middle Ages (Evers, 1967; Gard, 1949 and Gernet, 1956). These studies, and others, often have been conducted by occidental scholars (Spiro, 1967 and 1970).

To understand the roots of economics (or, for that matter, those of any discipline) may be beyond the grasp and understanding of most of us. Two determinants seem, however, to be always present. One is the presence of and the powerful thought of an epoch-creating individual, who describes the structure of the universe and gives us a lesson as to how to perceive it. Another is the material circumstances of the day. It is the virtue of exalted thought to see the conventional reality which we all see and then to travel beyond it, at least, into the future. It is capable of seeing a variety of alternative futures, both good and bad, and of selecting an appropriate future.

Historically, both the arts and the sciences draw convenient implications from the root-thought. This creates a world outlook. In turn, crafts, cities, and trades are created.

The roots of Buddhist economics were laid out by Shakymuni who was a personality and a theoretician. It was his enlightened personality which laid the foundations for Buddhist theory as we know it and the practice embodied in it. Its essence was the enlightened mind: the ability to see this time and this universe; the ability to see beyond this time and this universe. The Buddha preached that the highest goal of enlightenment is dependent on material conditions. When this is expressed in philosophical language we see it as a syncretic or "middle way": enlightened thought expressed in spiritual action, determined by *samsaric* or material conditions.

Historically, in the twentieth century, we have had the meeting of Buddhism and socialism. With this, a discussion of economics became indispensable and obvious to both hierarchies. Buddhist doctrine was interpreted to provide scriptural authority for new constitutions or to re-create Buddhist nations in terms of their own indigenous economics.

Some of these discussions have been termed subsequently "leaping from Feudalism to Socialism; by-passing Capitalism" by Soviet, Mongolian, and Cambodian writers. Their desired, chief intellectual conclusion — within the Leninist framework — was that a feudal country could become socialist without going through a capitalist stage of economic development. Great attention is paid by them to the "stages", to the materialist dialectic unfolding, and so on (Chattopadhyaya, 1969; Gerasimova, 1964).

In their schema, the ripening of the previous stage, the role of the intelligent proletariat is less significant than in the discussions of the Bolshevik — the Great October — Revolution. Here the socio-economic/political analysts take what they can find and Buddhism has been useful for these purposes. Often this does not fit nicely into the Marxist categories. But as religion, the size of the monastic population, and the monastic land ownership, was so important in the Buddhist theocracies of Central Asia, it was given a big role in their confiscation of land and their economic reforms (Wieczynski, 1978).

The topic of this synthesis of Buddhism and socialism has not been examined in great detail by Western analysts. In history, the names of the Buddhist Leninist Agvan Dorziev, in the USSR in the 1920s, and of the Buddhist Marxist Thaking Soe, in Burma in 1930, stand out, as do the names of those pioneers who investigated Buddhism and Marxism at the same time and, in the process, put economics in its own prominent place. Chattopadhyaya (1969), Gerasimova (1964) and Sayercrantz (1965) have touched on this topic. The fact, as compared to analysis, has been raised anew in Burma and Sri Lanka.

### *Sri Lanka*

In 1950 following independence, Sri Lanka, confronted with the issues of running its own country in its own way, was a historical example of this synthesis. In this case, the socialism was of a Fabian type, the language was Marxian, and the Buddhism was Theravadin.

> It was in Ceylon that ... Buddhist reactions against the imperial powers of historical Christendom had the most radical effect on a Nationalist-Marxist political alliance (Sayercrantz, 1965, p. 5).

For example, in 1953 *Dharma-Vijaya* (*Triumph of Righteousness or the Revolt in the Temple*) was published (Vijayaradhana, 1953). It claimed that Marxism is a leaf taken from the book of Buddhism, that Ashoka was a Lenin of Buddhism, and it translated the Buddha's doctrine to mean happiness here and now in this actual human world. As Sayercrantz put it:

> Marxism was meant to provide an economic methodology for Buddhism . . . As the Buddhist aim is the overcoming of universal suffering . . . the Marxist aim is the overcoming of economic suffering (Sayercrantz, 1965, p. 196).

and

> Both Buddhism and Marxism are comprehensive methodologies for the overcoming of suffering, the former by the psychological, the latter by sociological means . . . But the Buddhist quest . . . is more comprehensive than the Marxist quest: Profit motivation and capital acquisitiveness that Marxism strives to overcome are only a particular instance of Attachment . . . that Buddhism aspires to conquer (Sayercrantz, 1965, p. 200).

In Sri Lanka, in the 1980s, politicians used the Buddhist and Marxist doctrines and institutions which had been invented and built in the two previous decades. In the area of economics, Buddhist agricultural experiments were developed and Buddhist money and credit policy conducted by the state-operated banking system with a well-developed plan (Karunatilake, 1976).

The work of Ariyaratrna, the Buddhist leader of the agricultural reformist Sarvodaya movement, is well known and has been interpreted by Kantowsky (1980) and Macy (1983). Also, Karunatilake (1976), the director of research in the Central Bank of Ceylon, extended Buddhist economics to the area of money and banking, and to monetary policy. More recently, due to the civil war, there has been some reluctance to express as clearly as before the principles of Buddhism, as embodied in social and economic fields.

*Other Countries*

In Burma, a syncretic relation between the Buddhist Sangha and the State has often existed. After independence, in 1948, it was felt that Buddhism "... was an ideal accompaniment to socialism, reinforcing the moral and ethical dimension of a materialist political philosophy" (Powell, 1989, p. 56). In 1960 Buddhism became a state religion in Burma. This immediately resulted in policies designed on the basis of that religion, for education and health. Shortly thereafter, economic policies, such as those relating to pricing of rice, nationalization of transport, flowing from the same source as the Buddhist Constitution, were put into effect. The prime mover behind these reforms was U Nu (1975), who was explicitly inspired by Buddhism and has continued his actions in Buddhist affairs into the 1990s.

It must be noted, however, that the Buddhist, socialist, democratic government was replaced by a military regime in 1962. This was followed by a careful separation of church and state. By 1988, however, the Buddhist monks of the Sangha became again an active element in Burmese politics favouring civilian rule and a democratic constitution. Experts agree that without the Buddhist Sangha's acquiescence there will be no permanent solution either to Burma's political or to its economic troubles.

In the English-speaking world, the familiar work of E.F. Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful* (1973), has non-Marxist but syncretic roots, putting man's spiritual needs alongside his physical desires. Schumacher's Buddhist economics assumes the best of the possible worlds: transitional turmoil in the political process has ceased. We can achieve economic ends by a minimization of demand and careful management of supply processes; forgetting about the question of power. The same can be said of the famous poet Gary Snyder's (1974; 1977) excursions into a Utopian variant of Buddhist economics.

Finally there are some syncretic ideas barely on the horizon. Bhikku Buddhadasa (1986) and Sivaraksa (1986) in Thailand are in the process of creating *Dhammic* socialism — a Buddhist socialism minus Marx — from the very roots of indigenous culture. Thailand was not a colonized country, did not experience the wave of national "reconstruction" which afflicted other countries following World War II. Buddhist socialism in Thailand has been inspired by opposition to the traditional bureaucratic Buddhism, Western cultural dominance, and Asian Marxism.

The most notable of the Thai Buddhist monarchs was King Mongkut (depicted rather inaccurately in *The King and I*) who was himself a monk for 27 years prior to his coronation in 1851. This coronation increased the existing connection between the Crown and the Sangha which was again expressed, in 1902, with the organization of the monastic Sangha as a branch of the Thai Civil Service — a system which remains in force to the present day.

For the past 30 years, however, the monk Buddhadasa (1986), recognized as one of the chief Thai Buddhist spokesmen, had articulated his concept of Dhammic socialism based on the ethics of, and the pursuit of morality by, each individual. When the Sangha, he says, becomes directly involved with the apparatus of the state it finds itself at odds with the traditional view of the monk's role. There should instead be a return to the words of the Buddha himself and the simple and meditative way of life that is the substance of the Buddha's religion.

The fundamentalism of Buddhadasa, then, does not recognize the existence of national social or economic problems to be solved by Buddhist means, but sees itself as a solution to all problems. If each individual becomes enlightened, making decisions correctly, the Buddhist economic relations, matured over centuries, can carry on undisturbed, without a need for social reform or economic policies.

## Conclusion So Far

In the twentieth century, with the socialist revolutions, or in the process of independence, politics and economics came to the fore. What we see are varieties of economics, and of political economy, attempting to answer practical questions. Most of these are political questions but economists were often asked to invest a "non-political" answer. In doing this, they often used Buddhism. This resulted in variants of Buddhist economics or social policy.

As Hengel would say, Buddhist ideas created and moulded these societies. But each of these countries had economies which grew out of the material conditions — in a Marxian way. So it is never just one or the other; it is not the question of Hegel or Marx. The Buddhist thought is used rather like a mirror. Buddhism can overcome the split between the ideas and the material circumstances but only as a reflection — a dream to be embodied, directed and coloured for the benefit of all sentient beings. This is the *summum bonum* of Buddhism and the sole ultimate of Gautama's teachings.

Going back to the Keynes' quote, what might an economist do to make sure, as a man of ideas, that he can influence practical men in the future? He might investigate Buddhism and bring forth a variant of Buddhist economics useful to our present economics. This, some have attempted to do[Alexandrin, 1979; 1981a; 1981b; 1986; 1988; 1991].

## Elements of Buddhist Economics

In traditional economics when we say "economic man" we are referring to the man whom Adam Smith invented two centuries ago and who received polishing in the hands of Alfred Marshall at the turn of this century. He is interested in things economic. His mind-set determines how he performs or operates. He is equipped with tools of Newtonian calculus. He operates in several ways but always rationally.

This economic man performs his operations on a certain set of variables which are defined by his interests: income, profits, etc. The drive and energy behind his actions is the force of competition or linear progress. Marshall tells us how economic man sees the world: it is a marketplace squeezed into one geographical point and one time period, in which instant transactions happen. These characterizations are presented here in Table I.

| | Traditional economics | Buddhist economics |
|---|---|---|
| Type of person | "Economic man" of Adam Smith | Buddha<br>Bodhisattva |
| Operators | Rationality<br>Maximization<br>Minimization<br>Optimization | Rationality<br>Middle way<br>Co-determination<br>Optimization<br>Indeterminacy |
| Variables | Utility, profit, costs, Consumption, investment, Unemployment, rate of utilization, productivities | Perseverance<br>Generosity<br>Patience<br>Compassion<br>Impartiality<br>Perspective<br>Mindfulness |
| View of the world | One point in time and space — Euclidian | Impermanence ... multiple universes and three Buddhas: past, present and future |
| Behavioural force | Competition | Co-operation |

**Table I.** Elements and Behavioural Expressions of Economic Assumptions

Buddhist economics attempts to make traditional economics more inclusive in several ways. First, it takes man as he is — or could be — rather than working with an abstraction which one has to learn in order to understand. Second, its premiss is that economics is also education. This Buddhist economics, on its normative side, attempts to refine these skills and make them more socially, and otherwise, useful. Third, a Buddhist economics emphasizes a belief in the powers of people and their ability to *change* their thoughts and actions and, thus, their economics and their environment.

For the purposes of exposition, rather than historical description, we can create a Buddhist economics in terms of reconstruction:

In category one we replace the *Homo oeconomicus* with one who, in essence, limits his desires and performs his work well: a Buddha, or a near-Buddha, who is called a *Bodhisattva*. (A Buddha is defined as a human who behaves in such a way as to benefit all beings, past, present and future, but not himself. Bodhisattvas behave in such a way as to benefit all present beings including themselves (Nagarjuna and Gyatso, 1975).)

In category two, we put the Buddhist operators or techniques of solution. For example, Buddha, in his sermons, and Buddhists, given to meditation, emphasize the importance of ''mindfulness'', which is an acquired inner trait. In outside attitude and behaviour it is expressed as a Buddhist operator: the ''middle way''. In Table I are listed about half-a-dozen equivalents. The operators also come to us from the study of Buddhist logic.

In category three, at the place of variables, we *add* Buddhist elements, *paramitas* or virtues: value quantums, such as patience, generosity, and so on. Each one of these ethical elements of human behaviour explicitly enters the determination of each of the variables. For example, a pulp and paper company can determine an optimum rate of profit with compassion towards workers while taking a broad view, perhaps a global view, on the utilization of forests in the Amazon basin.

These three categories include the hard-core requirements for having an economics. You have a Buddhist-economic man; he will do things economic. You can even foretell roughly what he will do, what his responses will be. (You could expand this chart for Marxist or Socialist economics, similarly.)

The behavioural force which derives the Buddhist system is that of co-operation, not competition. Both motives have large circumferences and their circles overlap. But we know that at the centre of the ''competitive'' circle there is hardcore ''me-my-I'' type of selfishness, an outlook which is socially wasteful and unproductive in the long run. In the circle of ''co-operation'' we may find small and sentimental things. But near its centre we may have mature, rational, strong and enduring co-dependency which reduces strife and uncertainty and makes plans less necessary and less likely to fail. This ''socialist'' co-operation may be more costly. Empirically, we knew that the red market was less efficient than the black market in the USSR. In what was Yugoslavia, the worker self-management system had costs and troubles of its own.

The Buddhist economics approach may be costly for an additional reason. Buddhists aim at *nirvana* — the dust of *samsara* (this world) is to be taken lightly. It is impermanent — it is the dance of Shiva. But *samsara* is also the ground from which *nirvana* arises. You do not want to make that too good, too comfortable. The long-run goals may require a sacrifice in the present.

## Conclusion

A Buddhist economics can be seen as answering some of the questions which are being asked both from the East and the West. By reintroducing ethical elements into western economics, it provides a broader theoretical discussion of all the economics: supply and demand, monetary, micro and macro economics, credit, rates of interest, modelling and global forecasting. Its theory still can be set out in the terminology standard to economics and business administration.

Historically, synthesizing socialism (or Marxism) and Buddhism, a Buddhist economics has made a "western toolbox" more available to those responsible for actually creating the socio-economic/political milieu in the "new" twentieth-century countries. Whether allowing socialists to use Buddhism or Buddhists to use socialism, as in Burma, it gave governments a way to build their countries with skilful means.

The main use, then, of Buddhist economics at this time is educational. It can be helpful in planning for the future and can co-exist with many types of system and society. Buddhist economics recognizes existing human values which are appropriate and influential in our changing economic and social environment. If one absorbs some of its points one will discover that the rest of the world is neither like New Jersey nor Russia. This may make each of us a better businessperson, civil servant, and travelling companion.

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