Buddhism and Poverty

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Does Buddhism have anything special to contribute to our understanding of poverty, and how to alleviate it? Like other religions, Buddhism is sometimes criticized for its idealism: for encouraging a non-materialistic way of life that goes against the grain of our main desires and motivations. If we want to reduce poverty, we are referred instead to the science of economics, which has discovered the laws of economic growth that promote worldly well-being, and to international development agencies, which apply those principles to improve the lot of "undeveloped" societies.

This paper will argue that the opposite is true. In fact, contemporary economics is much more "idealistic" in the sense that it offers an unrealistic image of human nature based upon an eighteenth-century ethical system, utilitarianism, not derived from empirical observation but conceived in a philosopher's study. As a result, economists today tend to live in an idealized, one-dimensional world of statistics and equations which do not accurately reflect human values and goals in the world we actually live in.

In contrast with the calculating individualism that neo-liberal economics presupposes, Buddhism is more down-to-earth in its understanding of the sources of human ill-being and well-being. Its approach also happens to correspond more closely to the way most pre-modern communities have understood well-being, and "undeveloped" societies today still do. The purpose of this paper is to explore the implications of Buddhist teachings for the problems of economic development that confront us at the end of the twentieth century. From a Buddhist perspective, it is not surprising that the institutional efforts of the last fifty years have actually aggravated the social problems they purported to solve. Far from providing a solution, the development approach still taken for granted today is better understood as the problem itself. Buddhism can help us to see that, and to envision more viable alternatives.

Shakyamuni Buddha often summarized his teachings into four noble truths: ill-being [dukkha], its cause, its end, and its cure. He was sometimes called a great physician, for there is a logic to this structure that is consistent with how medicine approaches physical disease. A similar logic would also seem appropriate for other problems we want to solve, such as poverty, and when we try to understand economic "underdevelopment" according to this simple model, it helps to illuminate aspects of the issue that have often been overlooked or ignored.

What is poverty?

> *Paradoxically, perhaps, the actual obstacles to solving the world's most acute problems are less the cultural traditions of a large number of peoples than our own ingrained belief that the boundless progress which results from technology and the market can somehow liberate us from nature and society.*[1]

Until very recently religion has not played much of a role in development debates because its teachings have been usually perceived as preoccupied with a "higher world" or at least a different dimension of life. Whether or not that is true of some other religions, it is not the case for Buddhism. Far from ignoring or minimizing poverty, Buddhism is sensitive to it, offering both diagnosis and remedies. The most important thing, however, is that Buddhism challenges our understanding of poverty by contextualizing the problem in a different way, one which questions the assumptions that still dominate our thinking about "undeveloped" societies.

According to Buddhism poverty is bad because it involves *dukkha.* The Pali term *dukkha* is arguably the most fundamental concept of Buddhism, yet it is often misunderstood. The usual English translations are "suffering, frustration, dissatisfaction," but "ill-being" is perhaps the best in this context. The point of the Buddhist path is to end our *dukkha,* and that does not involve making any significant distinction between worldly *dukkha* and some other transcendental sort. As a philosophy and way of life which advocates eliminating *dukkha,* Buddhism does

[1]Gerard Berthoud, "Market," in *The Development Dictionary,* p. 74.

not and cannot value poverty that is a source of *duhkha*. In the *Anguttara Nikaya*, for example, the Buddha says that for a person who enjoys sense-pleasures poverty (Pali, *daliddiya*) is miserable, because it leads to borrowing and increasing debts and thus ever-increasing suffering.

Buddhism does value non-attachment towards material goods, and promotes the virtue of having less wants, yet that is not the same as encouraging poverty. Poverty, as ordinarily understood in early Buddhism, consists in lacking the basic material requirements for leading a decent life free from hunger, exposure and disease. Buddhism recognizes the importance of such minimum material needs even in the case of those who aspire to its spiritual goal, and in fact the basic needs of a monk or nun provide a useful benchmark for measuring that level of subsistence below which human beings should not be allowed to fall. The four requisites of a Buddhist renunciate are food sufficient to alleviate hunger and maintain one's health, clothing sufficient to be socially decent and to protect the body, shelter sufficient for serious engagement with cultivating the mind, and health care sufficient to cure and prevent disease. Buddhism considers people who voluntarily renounce worldly possessions and pleasures in favor of a life of such minimal needs as belonging to the community of "noble ones" (*ariyapuggala*).

Although lack of these four requisites seems a good definition of human destitution, they are not themselves sufficient to evaluate the situation of those who do not choose to follow a spiritual path of renunciation. For example, education and livelihood are not mentioned, the first because literacy and some study were usually taken for granted, the second because Buddhist renunciants in South Asia were mendicants who devoted themselves not to production but to contemplation. The Buddhism of Shakyamuni's time also assumed a low-tech culture which had comparatively little impact on its environment, as well as relative freedom from the external economic (although not political) forces that ravage many indigenous societies today. Because our situation is in many ways unique, it requires a creative response that cannot be discovered in early Buddhist teachings but must rather be informed by them. The important question is: who should decide what that response will be?

In any case, there is much in those teachings to inform us. According to the *Anguttara Nikaya*, the Buddha taught that some people are like the completely blind because they do not have the vision to improve

their material circumstances, nor the vision to lead a morally elevated life. Others are like the one-eyed because, although they have the vision to improve their material conditions, they do not have the vision to live morally elevated life; the third class have the vision to improve both. Such Buddhist teachings imply that when measuring poverty it is not enough to evaluate the material conditions. For a more comprehensive evaluation of deprivation it is necessary to take into account the moral quality of people's lives. But that is not to minimize the importance of the first eye. There is a causal relationship between material poverty and social deterioration, according to the Lion's Roar Sutta (*Cakkavatti-sihanada Sutta*).

In this *sutta* the Buddha tells the story of a monarch in the distant past who initially venerated and relied upon the Buddhist teachings, doing as his sage advised: "Let no crime prevail in your kingdom, and to those who are in need, give property." Later, however, he began to rule according to his own ideas and did not give property to the needy, with the result that poverty became rife. Due to poverty one man took what was not given and was arrested; when the king asked him why, the man said he had nothing to live on. So the king gave him some property, saying that it would be enough to carry on a business and support his family.

Exactly the same thing happened to another man; and when other people heard about this they too decided to steal so they would be treated the same way. Then the king realized that if he continued to give property to such men, theft would continue to increase. So he decided to get tough on the next thief: "I had better make an end of him, finish him off once for all, and cut his head off." And he did.

At this point in the story, one might expect a moralistic parable about the importance of deterring crime, but it turns in exactly the opposite direction:

> Hearing about this, people thought: "Now let us get sharp swords made for us, and then we can take from anybody what is not given, we will make an end of them, finish them off once and for all and cut off their heads." So, having procured some sharp swords, they launched murderous assults on villages, towns and cities, and went in for highway-robbery, killing their victims by cutting off their heads.

> Thus, from the not giving of property to the needy, poverty became rife, from the growth of poverty, the taking of what was not given increased, from the increase of theft, the use of weapons increased, from the increased use of weapons, the taking of life increased ... (*Digha-Nikaya* iii 65 ff, from *The Long Discourses*, 396-405)

Despite some fanciful elements, this myth has some important implications. Poverty is presented as a root cause of immoral behavior such as theft, violence, falsehood, etc. Unlike what we might expect from a supposedly world-denying religion, the Buddhist solution has nothing to do with accepting our "poverty karma". The problem begins when the king does not give property to the needy — that is, when the state neglects its responsibility to maintain distributive justice. According to this influential *sutta*, social breakdown cannot be separated from broader questions about the justice or injustice of the social order. The solution to poverty-induced crime is not to punish severely but to provide for people's basic needs.

In another *sutta*, the Buddha speaks of the four kinds of happiness (*sukha*) attained by householders: posessing enough material resources, enjoying those resources, sharing them with relations and friends, and not being in debt. More important than any of them, he emphasizes, is the happiness of leading a blameless life. Elsewhere the Buddha teaches that the greatest wealth is contentment (*santutthi paramam dhanam*). There are said to be seven kinds of of noble wealth: faith, moral conduct, the shame and the fear of doing something reprehensible, developing one's character, sacrificing one's possessions for the benefit of others, and insight into three characteristics of existence (*dukkha*, impermanence, and nonself). The Buddha says that in the discipline of the noble ones who follow the Buddhist path, the absence of these seven may be called true poverty, a poverty even more miserable than that resulting from the lack of material resources.

By redefining these moral qualities as "noble wealth," Buddhism draws attention to the fact that the single-minded pursuit of material wealth will not make human beings happy or even rich. A world in which envy (*issa*) and miserliness (*macchariya*) predominate cannot be considered one in which poverty has been eliminated. This follows from the second noble truth of the Buddha: the cause of *dukkha* is *tanha*, "craving." When human beings gain an intense acquisitive drive for some object, that object becomes a cause of suffering. Such objects are

compared to the flame of a torch carried against the wind, or to a burning pit of embers: they involve much anxiety but very little satisfaction — an obvious truth repressed by immediately turning our attention to another craved object. Buddhism considers such a proliferation of wants as the basic cause of human ill-being.

This implies that poverty can never be overcome by proliferating more and more desires which are to be satisfied by consuming more and more goods and services. In some places this may temporarily result in the elimination of material poverty, yet at the cost of promoting a different kind of poverty that is even more harmful. In short, there is a fundamental and inescapable poverty "built into" a consumer society. For that reason, development projects which seek to end poverty by "developing" a society into an economy focused on consumption are grasping the snake by the wrong end. We should not be surprised that such efforts in social engineering create more problems than they solve.

This is not a criticism of wealth itself: as in the Bible, not money but *love* of money is the source of evil. However, wealth must be acquired by righteous means, through one's own efforts without using immoral or exploitative methods. Economic activity involving injury to human or nonhuman life, or undermining the moral ideals of a society, however beneficial that may be according to purely economic criteria, is unacceptable from a Buddhist perspective.

Is this image of our human nature and its potential too idealistic? I don't think so: in fact, this approach reflects better than economic theory the attitudes of most societies not already conditioned by advertising into believing that happiness is something you purchase. According to my favorite definition, by the Vietnamese teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, Buddhism is "a clever way to enjoy your life." Confusing the quality of one's life with a quantitative "standard of living" is, in contrast, a stupid way. Many of the Third World peoples we have been so eager to "develop" seem to be more aware of the difference than we are.

The first World Bank definition of poverty was based upon the crude criterion of average national income. Since then the Bank has become more sensitive to differences of income among sectors within a country, and now even within families. For economics, however, lack of income remains the basic criterion of ill-being, perhaps because some such numerical measurement is necessary to satisfy the economist's craving for statistical assessment. Gross National Product is a lot easier

to gauge than General Well-Being. As a result, development agencies have been slow to realize what many anthropologists have long since understood: in traditional societies, especially rural communities, income is not the primary criterion of well-being; it is sometimes not even a major one.

> One of the things we found in the village which surprised us was people's idea of wellbeing and how that related to having money. We talked to a family, asking them to rank everybody in the village from the richest to the poorest and asking them why they would rank somebody as being less well off, and someone as poor. And we found that in the analysis money meant very little to the people. The person who was ranked as poorest in the village was a man who was probably the only person who was receiving a salary.[2]

When a master builder in a Bulgarian community was invited to rank people according to wealth, he "spontaneously enlarged the list of wellbeing criteria emphasizing the importance of children's education, good health and a good humoured nature.... Interestingly, the less well-off group included the most wealthy person in the village — an unhappy, bad tempered fellow put at the bottom of the pile along with the drunks and the sick."[3] From his study of the literature Robert Chambers concludes: "Income, the reductionist criterion of normal economists, has never, in my experience or in the evidence I have been able to review, been given explicit primacy."

To assume that we in the "developed" world know something about worldly well-being which such peoples do not is a form of intellectual imperialism that looks increasingly dubious. De-emphasizing income is something difficult for us to understand, since money is after all the "pure means" that enables us to buy anything ... or is it? Our obsession with economic growth seems natural to us because we have forgotten the historicity of the "needs" we now take for granted. That includes the need for a monetary income in Western societies now thoroughly monetarized and commodified, where anything can be converted into anything else through a common medium of exchange. Since our needs (or rather our wants) are now taken for granted as defining our com-

[2] Quoted in Robert Chambers, *Whose Reality Counts* (London: Intermediate Technology, 1997), p. 179.

[3] *Ibid.*

mon humanity as much as universal human rights do, we are encouraged to forget what for Buddhism is an essential human attribute if we are to be happy: the need for self-limitation.

The fundamental human problem is not the technological and economic issue of meeting all our material needs — something psychologically as well as environmentally impossible — but the psychological and spiritual need to understand the nature of our own minds. For this reason any formulation of "needs" is as much a value judgement as it is a determination of fact. This is something Buddhism and other religions emphasize but economics does not acknowledge. Economics cannot avoid reducing *the good* to *the amount* because it factors all desires into its basic equation of scarcity, which derives from comparing limited means with potentially unlimited wants. Without having been seduced by the utopian dream of a technological cornucopia, however, it would never occur to most "poor" people to become fixated on fantasies about all the things they *might* have. For them, their ends are an expression of the means available to them. Insofar as they do this, we are imposing our own value judgements when we insist on seeing them as poor, or as living in a state of scarcity (again, except for the destitute unable to satisfy basic requisites for survival). It is presumptuous to assume that they must be unhappy, and that the only way to become happy is to start on the treadmill of a lifestyle increasingly preoccupied with consumption.

All this is expressed better by an analogy popular in Tibetan Buddhism. The world is full of thorns and sharp stones (and now broken glass as well). What should we do about this? One solution is to pave over the entire earth; alternatively, we can wear shoes. "Paving the whole planet" is a good metaphor for how our collective technological and economic project is attempting to make us happy. It will not be satisfied even when all the earth's resources are transformed into products to be used. The other solution is for our minds to learn how to make and wear shoes, so that our collective ends become an expression of the renewable means that the biosphere provides.

Why do we assume that "income/consumption poverty" is the same as ill-being? That brings us to the heart of the matter. For us, material well-being has become increasingly important because of our loss of faith in any other possibility of fulfillment — for example, in heaven with God, or the secular heaven of socialism, or even (due to despair

about the environmental crisis) the future progress of humankind. As this suggests, increasing our "standard of living" has become so compulsive for us because it serves as a substitute for traditional religious values — or, better, because it has actually become a kind of secular religion for us. If so, our efforts to economically "develop" Third World peoples, who have their own spiritual traditions, may be viewed as a contemporary form of religious imperialism, a new kind of mission to convert the heathen ... Despite their benighted violence, then, do "Third World terrorists" understand this aspect of globalization better than we do?

What are the causes of poverty?

> With the rise of the modern world, a distinctly modern faith — faith in progress — arose to make sense of, and give ultimate meaning to the new notions and institutions that were now dominant. Our deep reverence for science and technology was inextricably linked up with this faith in progress. The universal enforcement of the nation-state was carried out under the banner of progress. And increasing conformity with the rule of economics, and intensified belief in its laws, are still shadows of this enlightened faith.[4]

According to the accepted development model, the cause of poverty is also not a major issue. Poverty is more or less taken for granted: it is the normal condition of "undeveloped" peoples, one which plagues all pre-modern societies, since it can be alleviated only by technological and economic development.

From a Buddhist perspective, however, there is something odd about this indifference to the causes of something we want to cure. This is reinforced by some intriguing facts which do not support the assumption that poverty is the normal pre-modern condition. Studies of "stone age economics" have concluded that the first humans in some ways had a comfortable life more leisurely than ours. Archeological research into early hunting-gathering communities (and anthropological surveys of more contemporary ones) has found that they usually survived quite well on a few hours work a day, with a diet more nutritious and varied than the farming settlements that supplanted them.

[4] *Ibid, p. 178.*

Agriculture was harder work and a less healthy life, but it could support a greater population density and still produce a surplus — the latter advantage usually restricted to those who had the power to appropriate it. Such appropriation led to the development of social classes, something which could not easily arise within hunting and gathering communities. We think of this appropriation as the origin of kings and priesthoods, but it can just as well be looked upon as the origin of the poor, deprived of the fruits of their more arduous labors.

If social class continues to be our fundamental social problem, it is one that fifty years of development have done very little to alleviate, for, as many recent studies have shown, the share of human wealth owned by the rich worldwide has increased during this period, and continues to do so, while the share owned by the poor has decreased. According to the United Nations Development Report for 1998, twenty percent of the global population now accounts for 86 percent of consumption; the three richest people on the planet have assets that exceed the combined GNP of the 48 poorest countries. The result is that three-fifths of the 4.4 billion people in developing countries lack basic sanitation, one-third have no safe drinking water, one-quarter are inadequately housed, one-fifth undernourished and one-fifth lack access to modern health services. This continuing catastrophe is partially due to the fact that in "undeveloped" countries it is the powerful and wealthy classes that continue to benefit most from the efforts of development agencies such as the World Bank; and when projects fail, as many do, it is the poor that suffer the most from their failure.

For example, between 1980 and 1989 thirty-three African countries received 241 structural adjustment loans from the World Bank. During that same decade, average GDP and food production per capita in those countries both declined. The value of the minimum wage dropped by over twenty-five percent, government expenditure on education declined from $11 billion to $7 billion, and primary school enrolments dropped from eighty percent in 1980 to sixty-nine percent in 1990. The number of people classified as poor rose from 184 million in 1985 to 216 million in 1990, an increase of seventeen per cent (George and Sabelli, 141). If one accepts the World Bank's profession that its primary concern is to eliminate poverty, one is forced into the paradoxical conclusion that one of the causes of poverty is its own efforts to reduce poverty.

In the earliest Buddhist texts the cause of *dukkha* is sometimes identified simply as craving, and sometimes as the three roots of moral evil (*akusalamula*). Human ill-being can be resolved only by eradicating all three of these roots: greed (*lobha*), ill-will (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*). The destruction of these sources of unwholesome motivation is itself the goal of the Buddhist way of life, i.e., the "awakening" of *nibbana.*

The role of greed and ill-will in causing poverty is more or less obvious, the function of delusion more subtle. One way to understand its role is to consider how we are misled by our own dualistic thinking. Dualistic categories divide things into opposites which are nonetheless dependent on each other because the meaning of each is the negation of the other. Such a conceptual understanding can lead to problems which are much more than conceptual. If I want to live a "pure" life (however that is understood), I will be preoccupied with *avoiding* impurity. In the same way, desire for fame is also dread of anonymity, for without such dread one will not do whatever is necessary to become famous. Whether I win or lose that competition, I am motivated to play that game by internalizing the comparison between them. The same applies to my hope for success and my fear of failure. In each case, we hope to gain the first term (purity, fame, success) and escape the second (impurity, anonymity, failure), but psychologically they are indivisible, for each is the shadow of the other. In the same way, desire for wealth is inevitably shadowed by and preoccupied with fear of poverty.

The implication of this dialectic for us is that there is no such thing as a "poverty problem" that can be understood separately from what must also be called a "wealth problem." Rather, we are inflicted with a *wealth/poverty dualism.* This can be understood in several ways. One way is to recognize the simple point that many critics have made about globalization: although not a zero-sum game, rapid economic growth has also meant rapid impoverishment and rapid increase in inequality, a different kind of development that development agencies prefer to ignore but that structural adjustment programs have abetted.

To understand why we allow this to happen requires us to apply the wealth/poverty dualism to our collective motivations. Isn't a concern for "attacking poverty" the flip side of our aggressive preoccupation with wealth-creation? In this way we excuse the negative impacts of economic globalization because, after all, we do intend to address those problems.

More insidiously, we thereby rationalize a way of life preoccupied with economic growth, no matter what its costs. "Undeveloped" poor people *must* be miserable because that is how *we* would experience their circumstances of life. Mesmerized as we are by growth, we assume that everyone else must be too — or should be, especially if we are to have access to their resources and their demand for our consumer goods.

In medieval Europe, poverty provided an opportunity to save one's own soul by being generous; today some such generosity is necessary to justify our own acquisitive lifestyle. We can feel good about making a killing on the stock market if we donate some of it to charity. More cynically, poverty programs have been useful for subverting protest. "The goal of assistance is precisely to mitigate certain extreme manifestations of social differentiation, so that the social structure may continue to be based on this differentiation" (Georg Simmel). Today we have sophisticated economic instruments that allow us to take such assistance a step further and (since we no longer worry about our immortal souls) make a profit from our generosity: the assistance must be returned, with interest, no matter what the social cost to the recipients.

Development institutions have been quick to emphasize that a lasting solution to world poverty requires continued growth, a logical conclusion if one assumes that the only route to follow is the production/consumption example provided by the "developed" countries. This means diverting limited community resources to new economic goals, which requires further consolidation of the power of government agencies and other financial institutions. Such power no longer *forces* anything, now it *helps* — but who needs help, and how that help is to be given, is decided not by the people to be helped but by the helper. In this way our human nature is redefined according to the interests and control of professionals.

Global poverty is thus conceptually necessary if the world is to be completely commodified and monetarized. Otherwise one cannot rationalize the profound social reorientation (experienced by most people as social *dis*organization) that is required. Traditional cultures and lifestyles must be redefined as obstacles to be overcome, and elites must become dissatisfied with them, in order to create a class of more individualistic and self-interested people that will serve as the vanguard of consumption.

There is another implication of the wealth/poverty dualism which afflicts the psychology of wealthy people and nations. The poverty of others is also necessary because it is the benchmark by which we measure our own achievements. Unless there are losers, we cannot feel like winners. Unless the undeveloped are unhappy about their lot, we are unable to feel happy about what we have, unable to rationalize the things we have had to put up with in order to get there, unable to excuse the negative consequences of our economic development. In this fashion too what we perceive as a poverty problem is due to the tinted lenses of our wealth/poverty spectacles — and what is colored most of all by those lenses is our own self-appearance. To live in a commodified world is to recognise one's own commodification, and the value of commodities is determined by price comparison. Who earns more, you or me? We can rarely ask this question because it cuts too deeply, to the source of our self-esteem. This also applies collectively, to the way *we* see *others*. In all these ways, we *need* the poor.

None of the above intends to make light of the situation of those many people in the world whose destitution needs to be alleviated as soon as possible. What it does suggest, though, is that among the causes of poverty today are the delusions of the wealthy — delusions which have very concrete effects on the well-being of many people, including the wealthy themselves. If so, we should not allow ourselves to be preoccupied only with the poverty side of the problem; to correct the bias, we should become more concerned about the wealth side: the personal, social, and environmental costs of our obsession with wealth-creation and collective growth. Far from ignoring genuine poverty, Buddhism emphasizes the importance of seeing through such dualisms if our efforts to help the poor are to be actually successful.

What is the end of poverty?

> The salvation of the people and of the nations shall come about through binding them ever more tightly to the international market, equated with the world community. There, the poor shall partake of the same substance as the rich. Like any universal truth, adjustment is a purely abstract notion even if its application causes concrete pain. The available choices are reduced to one. There Is No Alternative; we are all bound by a single, compulsory, truth

> which shall be recognized. Then shall the wayward nations be freed from their errors.[5]

It is, again, curious that development agencies such as the World Bank have said so little about what would constitute the end of poverty. The goal is expressed in negative terms which lack a positive vision of what kind of world we would have if poverty were eliminated. We are led to conclude that this lack of articulation is either unconscious, because the goal is more or less taken for granted, or conscious, because the Bank does not want to reveal it. In either case there are reasons for concern.

Both goals envision the solution as integration of the poor into the global economy. The difference between them is what their role is expected to be in the globalization process.

The first scenario speaks in vague, general terms about the benefits that accrue from linking up with the world economy: a market for one's production; access to loans, seeds, and other resources; leading to the most important thing, an income that enables purchase of consumer goods — which opens the door to the promised land of capitalism. Sure, one must start at the bottom, but with hard work and some luck you might end up big-time consumers like us.

The second scenario is more realistic about the possibility of ending up consumers like us. If that is the temptation, the promise is false. Insofar as the "undeveloped" internalize our wealth/poverty syndrome, they are doomed to a life of increasing *dukkha*, since there is no hope that they will be able to mimic our lifestyle. A world of six billion car drivers? The earth does not have enough resources for China's population to live like Americans, nor could its sinks absorb enough pollutants. But not to worry, for in truth the world's poor have a different role to play.

If aliens from another planet had been observing the World Bank's actual development practices over the last fifty years, without listening to any of the rhetoric about its intentions — helping the undeveloped, attacking poverty, and so forth — what would they assume about the Bank's goals? On the basis of his own lengthy experience with Zimbabwe, Professor Colin Stoneman, an economic statistician at the University of York, concluded that the World Bank is an institution "whose

[5] Jose Maria Sbert, "Progress," in *The Development Dictionary*, p. 192.

overall intention, and increasingly effect, is to promote the construction of a single world market, substantially on the basis of the present world division of labor ... [a] role mediated through an ideology that is claimed to be a value-free science" [i.e., economics]. Doug Hellinger, a former Bank consultant on urban development now with the Development Group for Alternative Policies (D-GAP), makes the same point more cynically: "The Bank is saying that to join the world economy you have to become more efficient and you have to be able to compete against imports from around the world. But the purpose is not to develop Brazil or to develop Ghana. They could not give a damn. The U.S. is trying to stay competitive with Europe and Japan and the Bank is helping to provide the government's friends in business with cheap labor, a deregulated atmosphere, and export incentives. It isn't a development strategy, it's a corporate strategy."[6]

If this has indeed been their intention, the World Bank and the IMF have been quite successful:

> For decades, the World Bank has had a free hand to carry out its policies, especially during the 1980s following the onset of the debt crisis. Surveying the results, some critics make the mistake of proclaiming that development has failed. It hasn't. Development as historically conceived and officially practised has been a huge success. It sought to integrate the upper echelons, say ten to forty percent, of a given third world population into the international, westernized, consuming classes and the global market economy. This it has accomplished brilliantly.
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> A decade or more of structural adjustment has given marked impetus to the process of global integration. Elites everywhere have managed to make their poorer compatriots pay the costs of adjustment, whereas they, on the whole, have profited from it or at the very least have lost, proportionally, far less.

It is no coincidence that it was just after the Cold War began, in January 1949, that President Truman enunciated the doctrine of assistance for "underdeveloped areas." The Soviet Union, as the first non-capitalist power to become industrialized, offered an alternative model for development that could compete for the loyalty of Third World coun-

[6] Marianne Gronemeyer. "Helping," in *The Development Dictionary*, p. 97.

tries. It is also no coincidence that, now that the Soviet Union has collapsed, economic globalization has accelerated at the same time as the burden of structural adjustment has increased for most of those same countries, still underdeveloped: these also are not two separate developments but two faces of the same global integration.

What is the meaning of this integration? And why is it so worrisome? In the same year that the World Bank and the IMF were established (1944), the economic historian Karl Polanyi published *The Great Transformation: the political and economic origins of our time.* His account of the origins of capitalism does not directly address the globalization that the Bank and IMF have since encouraged, yet it remains the best account of the social consequences of a capitalist economy: a reversal of the traditional relationship between a society and its economy.

In pre-modern societies, and in traditional ones today, markets that exist are limited in place, scope, and time. They play a very circumscribed role because they tend to disrupt social relations. Such societies make no clear distinction between the economic sphere and the social sphere, with the result that economic roles are subordinate to social relationships. According to Polanyi, pre-capitalist man does not act so as to safeguard his individual interest in the possession of material goods; he acts so as to safeguard his social standing, his social claims, his social assets. He values material goods only in so far as they serve this end."[7]

The great story of capitalism is the liberation of markets from such constraints. Today we believe that the freedom to engage in market exchanges benefits all of us because it leads to the economic growth that satisfies our needs. If it is true, however, that there is no clear distinction between the economic and social spheres, there is another way to understand unfettered markets: as a reversal of the traditional relationship between a society and its economy: today, "instead of economy being embedded in social relations, social relations are embedded in the economic system."

Insofar as there are no restrictions to protect social relationships, this tends to the commodification of *everything*, which becomes a potential resource that can be utilized for economic gain. This includes

[7] Susan George and Fabrizio Sabelli, *Faith and Credit: The World Bank's Secular Empire*, (Penguin, 1994), p.72.

the very moral fabric of society, woven of innumerable personal relationships, now commodified into "social capital" or "moral capital" — ugly economist terms that describe how market forces rely upon but damage that fabric of interpersonal responsibility. A basic contradiction of the market is that it requires character traits such as honesty, trust, etc. in order to work efficiently, yet it is primarily motivated by a greed for profit that tends to erode such personal responsibility for others. The last few decades have made this more obvious. In the United States, massive "downsizing" and a shift to part-time workers demonstrate diminishing corporate concern for employees, while at the top astronomical salary increases and management buy-outs reveal that the executives entrusted with managing corporations are becoming more adept at exploiting or cannibalizing them for their own benefit. Internationally, the globalizing market has promoted more exploitative relationships with the poor and powerless in "undeveloped" parts of the world, where predatory governments often cooperate in keeping factory wages at subsistence levels. These are examples of how the market itself "depletes moral capital" and therefore depends upon the community to regenerate it, in much the same way it depends upon the biosphere to regenerate natural capital. That is a good analogy, for the long-range consequences have been much the same: even as we have reached the point where the ability of the biosphere to recover has been damaged, our collective moral capital has become so exhausted that our communities (or collections of atomized individuals) are less able to regenerate it, with disturbing social consequences.

How do communities "generate moral capital"? This brings us back to the role of religion, something development institutions have more often seen as an obstacle than an aid. Throughout history, religions have been the main source and repository for society's deepest values and goals, those most essential to a community's harmony and self-understanding. Not all of these have been goals that we should pursue now, or values we want to encourage today, but genuine religions have thrived because they have the potential to promote and nurture responsible personal relationships. Aspiring bureaucrats need to learn more than literacy and accountancy skills if they are to be good clerks: they must also be equipped with a moral understanding of their responsibilities to other members of society. Needless to say, this applies all the way up and down the hierarchy of roles. Traditionally, religious values have

encouraged this best; in contrast, material values that emphasize income and consumption make it more difficult to resist the corruption of graft and bribes. This is not an abstract problem: it touches on what has been one of the major obstacles to successful development.

If a harmonious society requires the "moral capital" that religions usually regenerate and that market capitalism tends to deplete, we should not identify economic reform with market liberation. The implication works the other way: true social development may require us to reverse the transformation Polanyi wrote about, re-embedding the economy in social relations, rather than letting economic forces determine what happens to our communities. Needless to say, this applies at least as much to the wealthy nations as to the "undeveloped" ones.

For many historically "undeveloped" peoples, what we may see about their entrenched poverty is not the most important thing about their lives and culture. If traditional societies have their own standards of deprivation and well-being, imposing a foreign one on them is intellectual as well as economic imperialism. Insofar as that imposition undermines their traditional religious values, it may also be a type of religious imperialism.

Except for not allowing destitution to continue — which should be something all of us can agree on — we should accept that the world is enriched (as well as sometimes damaged) by a plurality of understandings about human ill-being and well-being. This does not mean that they all deserve to be tolerated: more totalitarian ones, in particular, do not. How we are to determine the difference between tolerable and intolerable understandings? This brings out the necessity for democracy and, just as important, freedom of religious practice. These, rather than military or economic impositions, provide the best ways to make those decisions.

The moral role of religions is difficult for most Western-trained economists to accept, since their discipline is a legacy of the eighteeenth-century Enlightenment project which contrasts scientific and social progress with the regressive weight of privileged churches. Today, however, it is necessary to recognize that the neoliberal economic understanding of what happiness is, and how that is to be achieved, is only one vision among many. Like every other, it has its advantages and disadvantages. There is a social price to pay for the comforts and commodities it offers, a price that should not be imposed on others who have

their own worldviews and values.

All societies are confronted with the same basic tragedy of life, which for Buddhism is not primarily poverty but illness, old age, and death. The main human response to this has been religion, which addresses it in various ways. From a perspective informed by the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, these responses are superstitious and escapist. From a Buddhist perspective, however, economic growth and consumerism are unsatisfactory alternatives because *they* are evasions, which repress the basic problem of life by distracting us with symbolic substitutes such as money, status, and power. Similar critiques of idolatry are explicit or implicit in all the great religions, and rampant economic globalization makes that message all the more important for our time.

How do we end poverty?

> The apostles of new life . . . are the minority, typically those whose close contact with Western education, Western political thought and Western material living standards has led them to want greater opportunities to practice their knowledge, greater outlets for their ambition, and a better material lot for their countrymen.[8]

> If we have to drive our people to paradise with sticks, we will do so for their good and the good of those who come after us.[9]

Here, finally, we must see the strength of the economic paradigm, in devising and implementing programs to end poverty — or so one would think. Unfortunately, because the solutions attempted have not been based on an adequate understanding of the three preceding questions (what is poverty, its causes, and its end), we should not be surprised that the attempts have not been very successful.

I think the best answer to this last question is very simple: we do not know. This is not a defect that can be remedied by more or better knowledge; the fact is, we cannot know, nor is it ending poverty something that *we* can do or should attempt to do. In this situation, what we need most is humility: the modesty that follows from acknowledging

[8] Catherine Caufield, *Masters of Illusion: the World Bank and the Poverty of Nations* (London: Macmillan, 1996), p. 159.

[9] *Faith and Credit: The World Bank's Secular Empire*, p. 147.

that we are unable to determine what is the best course for other peoples to follow. If we are sensitive to what is happening in our own backyards, we will have enough trouble trying to determine what is best for our "developed" societies, all of which have major social problems.

I am suggesting, quite seriously, that one of the best things we can do for many "undeveloped" peoples is to leave them alone. Whether or not that is the very best thing, it is better than many poverty programs that have further diminished the ability of the "poor" to meet their own needs, often because they have involved divesting local people of their local resources (e.g., diverting agriculture from self-consumption into monoculture for export). Letting-alone means allowing people to manage their own resources, deciding for themselves their own opportunities and capabilities. Instead of "doing nothing," however, this can require considerable intervention to restore local self-determination.

This is not to say that we are unable to help other communities decide what they would like to change in their lives. Needless to say, this is an extremely subtle process if the means are not to subvert the ends. Some recent work in development studies has been moving in this direction, and many of those new, more participatory approaches are summarized in Robert Chamber's highly-recommended book *Whose Reality Counts?* It argues persuasively that personal as well as professional and institutional change is necessary in order to promote truly successful development. Several Buddhist-inspired development projects, such as the Sarvodaya movement in Sri Lanka, already exemplify many of these changes.

However, letting-alone is not something that should apply to the problem of genuine destitution, which morally obligates us to provide, at the very least, sufficient food, clothing, basic shelter and medical care to all the world's people. This, it would seem, immediately brings us back to the onerous problem of devising economic development strategies to do so. In fact, these basic requisites could be met quite easily and inexpensively if our intentions were genuine and our motivation serious. Providing them to the needy would take a very small percentage of the world's annual product. "It is estimated that the additional cost of achieving and maintaining universal access to basic education for all, basic health care for all, reproductive health care for all, adequate food care for all and safe water and sanitation for all is roughly $40 billion a year," according to the UN Development Report for 1998. "This

is less than 4 percent of the combined wealth of the 225 richest people in the world." Probably the most effective way to provide those services would be through some revamped United Nations agencies.

I am reversing the usual metaphor and suggesting that instead of pretending to teach the poor how to fish, we give the most impoverished the fish they need. (The monarch in the Lion's Roar Sutta got into trouble because he failed to give property to the needy, not because he failed to promote economic growth). The dismal record of the last fifty years of development reveals the cruelty of the usual slogan: when we have taught the world's poor to fish, the effect has often been to deplete their fishing grounds for our consumption.

The problem is not that we do not have enough resources to provide for the basic needs of everyone. We have much more than enough. The problem is a lack of collective will, enough will to overcome the simple fact that the people who have the most say about what happens to the earth's resources do not care to do it. It is just not a priority for them, and insofar as our own preoccupation with wealth accumulation encourages us to acquiesce in this situation, we are complicit to it.

In other words, the problem of world poverty is not primarily an economic one. It is a matter of our collective intentions and therefore our values. That brings us back to religion, and the need for religious institutions which understand that market emphasis on acquisition and consumption undermines their most important teachings. The corrosive influence of economic globalization and its development institutions on other human values needs to be challenged. Revivified religions are perhaps our best hope to do so.