

Sharing and Restraint for Sustainable Economy

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Outline of speech:

Natural resources are limited, but human resources are unlimited. The doctrine and practice of Buddha dharma focus on the development of human resources through precepts, concentration and wisdom.

As proved by the life stories of the Buddha, he was an innovator and reformist in religion. After he was enlightened, he continued the simple life of a bhikshu, begging for alms, living in solitude, wearing the deserted clothes, teaching dharma, etc. His followers are called sangha, a community of six harmonies. Among the six harmonies, there is the harmony of sharing profits. His skill of leadership kept his sangha order extending and enlarging all the times.

As proved the history of Buddhism, new traditions, schools, doctrines, and methodology are developed in different cultural and geographical backgrounds. This induces the more effective and applicable approaches to improve.

Sūtras, commentaries, and analects of Chinese Chan masters will be quoted to explain that the Buddhist ideal of sharing and restraint is the cornerstone of sustainable economy.

Key words: Bodhisattva path, six harmonies, sustainable economy, compassionate sharing, wholesome restraint

Introduction

At Buddha's time, there is no environmental problems like today such as air pollution, water pollution and supplies, reduced agricultural land, increasing soil erosion, deforestation, widespread destruction of species, unrelenting loss of habitat and natural resources, global warming, and greenhouse effect, not to mention the alarming population increase and unwholesome human mentality of consumerism, material craving, and ownership. Consequently, the Buddha's teachings dealt little with green energy, sustainable economic development, and ecological balance. Rather, he focused on the elimination of human mental afflictions in order to achieve the eternal peace in mind.

However, this doesn't mean that we cannot get any insight from Buddhism with

the aim to save our planet and to provide a better-to-live environment for our future and our offspring. The Buddha's basic teachings of four noble truths, and eightfold noble paths can be the guideline and lighthouse in dealing with contemporary dilemma between economic development and ecological destruction: Face the problems, analyze the reasons, set the target, and adopt the right measures. Nirvāṇa, as the goal of Buddhist practice, refers to the complete ending of not only the psychological problems but also the physical, family, interpersonal, social, worldwide, and even the universal problems.

Pure Mind

Mind is emphasized in Buddhism as the mechanism of one's life and even the land. The Buddha told the bhikshus:

You should well observe and contemplate on your mind which is polluted by various desire, hatred, and ignorance just like in long evening. When the mind is afflicted, the sentient beings are afflicted. When the mind is purified, the sentient beings are purified.¹

Human being is composed by the pañca skandhāḥ or five aggregates of body, sensation, perception, volition, and consciousness. Among them, the consciousness plays the key role of producing body, sensation, perception, and volition. When the mind is polluted by the three poisons of desire, hatred, and ignorance, the individual will be polluted accordingly. Conversely, when the mind is purified, the individual will be purified. Therefore, the Buddhist practitioners should observe the śīla, samādhi, and prajñā in order to purify the mind and thus to attain eternal peace of nirvāṇa.

The Buddha said further in the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra* that the mind is the mechanism of Buddha-land:

Because of his straight mind, a Bodhisattva can do compassionate deeds. Because of doing compassionate deeds, a Bodhisattva can obtain profound mind. Because of obtaining profound mind, a Bodhisattva's mind is subdued. Because of subduing his mind, a Bodhisattva can do what he says. Because of doing what he says, a Bodhisattva can dedicate his merits to others. Because of dedicating his merits to others, a Bodhisattva has skillful means. Because of having skillful means, a Bodhisattva can accomplish sentient beings. Because of accomplishing sentient beings, the Buddha-land is purified. Because of the Buddha-land being purified, the teaching of dharma is purified. Because of the teaching of dharma being purified, the wisdom is purified. Because of the wisdom being purified, the mind is purified. Because of the mind being

¹ *Samyuktāgama Sūtra*, T02, No. 0099, p. 69.

purified, all merits are purified. Therefore, Ratnakuṭā! If a Bodhisattva wants to obtain pure land, he should purify his mind. Because of his mind being purified, the Buddha-land is purified.”²

This is a long consequential practice of establishing the Buddha-land: straight mind → compassionate deeds → profound mind → subduing mind → do what is said → dedicating merits → skillful means → accomplishing sentient beings → purifying Buddha-land → purifying the teaching of dharma → purifying wisdom → purifying wisdom → purifying mind → purifying merits. A Bodhisattva vows to attain Buddhahood by means of the six pāramitās which consists of not only prajñā or perfect transcendental wisdom but also metta-karuna or loving-kindness and compassion. In this sense, a Bodhisattva has to relieve sentient beings’ sufferings and to build an ecologically healthy world with perfect wisdom before he becomes a Buddha.

Creating Wealth

Wealth is neutral in nature, neither good nor bad. All depend on people’s mind. A good mind can make wealth become a tool to live happily for oneself and others while a bad mind can make wealth become a killer to destroy happiness for oneself and others.

The Buddha admonished laypeople to create, manage, and distribute wealth properly. Making money should be considered as a way to benefit other people, not as a crime.

If the Bodhisattvas seek for the knowledge of worldly technology, they aim to accumulate precious wealth with little labor, to benefit other sentient beings, to generate sentient beings’ very unique thoughts, and to help numberless sentient beings with equal giving out of skillful wisdom.³

Apparently, in Mahāyāna Buddhism, Bodhisattvas should do whatever they can to earn money, unnecessarily to say, with right livelihood and for the goodness of not only oneself but also others. What is the worldly technology? Its contents vary according to the time and location. However, we can imply from *Avatamsaka-mahāvaiṣṭhīya-sūtra* that it refers to all professions beneficial to sentient beings and the nature:

This Bodhisattva-mahāsattva, with the view to benefit sentient beings, should learn, without any exception, all worldly skills, the so called language, mathematics, paintings, books; master at all sciences in connection to earth, fire, fire, and wind; understand well medicine to cure all kinds of illness

² *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra*, f1, T14, No. 0475, p0538b.

³ *Yogācāra-bhūmi-śāstra*, f38, T30, No. 1579, p0503a.

including madness, heat, apparition, parasitic infestation, etc.; be skilled in writing, eulogy, song, dance, amusement, drama, talking, etc. ; administer properly city, village, palace, house, garden, stream, slope, pond, grass, tree, flower, herbs, etc. ; know the mines of gold, silver, gem, pear, glass, conch, jade, coral, etc. and recover them to people; observe well and un-mistakenly the sun, moon, stars, birds' singing, earthquake, dream, good or bad luck, lucky or unlucky appearances; uphold precepts, maintain mind-concentrated, achieve immeasurable supernatural powers, attain four formless concentrations, etc. and all other worldly things which will not cause any damage or affliction to the sentient beings. They will teach anything to benefit sentient beings, and gradually make them rest peacefully in the supreme Buddha dharma.⁴

In short, the Bodhisattvas should learn all kinds of professional skills which are not only the necessary guarantee of existence but also the helpful strength to benefit sentient beings. If one works hard, and abides by the law, no matter whatever one does, one will have the opportunity to get rich and to benefit the sentient beings.

Ways to Get and Keep Wealth

The Buddha told Sigala, the son of a householder, the six ways to get and keep wealth:

- One should learn skills first, and then obtain wealth;
- Once the wealth is obtained, one should keep and protect it.
- Be not extravagant in using money, and be cautious in selecting friends;
- One would rather beg rather than make friends with the cheaters, liars, and unfriendly.
- Accumulate wealth from little, just like the bees collect various flowers;
- The wealth will increase day by day, and not decrease until the end.
- Firstly, understand to stop and feel satisfactory in eating.
- Secondly, do one's work not lazily.
- Thirdly, save and accumulate money to protect against lacking.
- Fourthly, do farming, business, fishery, or raising livestock.
- Fifthly, establish stūpas and temples.
- Sixthly, build monastic houses.
- The householders should work diligently the above-mentioned items, and do them well without missing the time.
- Those who do accordingly will not diminish their wealth.

⁴ *Avataṃsaka-mahāvaiṣṭya-sūtra* f36, T10, No. 0279, p0192b.

Their wealth will increase every day, just like the ocean devours all streams.⁵ To keep the wealth is as important as to make wealth. The Buddha taught Singala the six ways of losing money in details:

There are six channels to dissipate wealth: 1. indulgence in intoxicants, 2. indulgence in gambling, 3. being undisciplined, 4. frequenting theatrical shows, 5. association with evil companions, and 6. the habit of laziness and idleness.⁶

Similar teachings can be found in *Samyuktāgama Sūtra* when the Buddha answered a deva's questions about how to use wisdom to seek for wealth, and how to manage the wealth in good manner.⁷

Consumerism verse Need-orientation

Initially consumerism may refer to the consideration that the free choice of consumers should strongly orient the choice by manufacturers of what is produced and how, and therefore orient the economic organization of a society. However, it tends to become a social and economic order that encourages the acquisition of goods and services in ever-increasing amount. Thorstein Veblen, in his book titled *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, examined the widespread values and economic institutions emerging along with the widespread "leisure time" in the beginning of the 20th century. He "views the activities and spending habits of this leisure class in terms of conspicuous and vicarious consumption and waste. Both are related to the display of status and not to functionality or usefulness."⁸

This negative sense of consumerism may arise from the overproduction, advertising, market globalism, global imaginary and profit-pursuit of capitalism. But, Master Sheng Yan (1931-2009), the founding abbot of Dharma Drum Mountain Monastery in Taiwan, argued that people's ignorance of what they need and what they want is the main driving force:

In contemporary society, due to the over-prosperity of material civilization and the too rapid change of social structure, people's view of value has been confused. They don't know what is the real need, what is the greedy want, what is the deserved "can want", and what is the responsible "should want." Because most people don't distinguish these four mentalities of need, want, "can want", and "should want", they just follow the fashion, and say what others say. What others have, I also want to have. Modern people always

⁵ *Sigala Sūtra* in *Dirgha-agama-sūtra* f11, T01, No. 0001, p0072a.

⁶ *Sigala Sūtra* in *Dirgha-agama-sūtra* f11, T01, No. 0001, p0070c.

⁷ *Samyuktāgama Sūtra*, T02, No. 0099, p. 0353a.

⁸ Thorstein Veblen (1899): *The Theory of the Leisure Class: an economic study of institutions*, Dover Publications, Mineola, N.Y., 1994, ISBN 0-486-28062-4. (Quote from Wikipedia)

“want to have too many things while they actually need not many things.”

Worse more, they also want what they should not want, and also want what they cannot want. As a result, they cannot get what they want; people’s mind becomes unstable, and many social problems happen.⁹

Greed for sensual pleasure is the basis of people’s afflictions and all problems. The living necessities of foods, clothes, accommodation, and transportation actually are very simple, and can be satisfied easily. Buddha dharma advocates simple and pure life, the middle way lifestyle away from sensual indulgence and self-mortification. Most people lack moral discipline, concentration and wisdom, and get trapped in the consumerism. People should know what they need, buy what they need, store what they need, and consume what they need instead of what they want. Sharing and restraint are thus the foundation of sustainable development and the antidote to environmental destruction.

Dhammic Socialism

The 20th century world was afflicted by two conflicting ideologies of the greed-based capitalism pushed by the supposed "free world" and the anger-based Marxism which backed armed insurgencies in Thailand and elsewhere in 1960s. Both were regarded by the Thai bhikkhu Buddhadasa as overly aggressive, violent, and insufficiently moral. To help explore a middle way, in 1960s he coined a Buddhist based approach "Dhammic Socialism."

Nature and society, in his understanding, are fundamentally "socialist" in that cooperation is necessary for survival and peace. Selfish individualism destroys far more than it can build. Socialism ("putting society first") should be grounded in Dhamma if it is to be moral, peaceful, and successful.

To be Dhammic is to be non-violent, unselfish, compassionate, mindful, and cool. Bhikkhu Buddhadasa summarized it in two words "peaceful" and "useful."

Being "peaceful" means doing nothing to hurt, harm, exploit, abuse, or oppress anyone, whether others or oneself. Such peacefulness requires a heart-mind free of selfishness and egoism.

Being "useful" means helping in the struggle for genuine liberation from suffering, no matter on what level or in what area of life. True Dhamma does not concoct dualities likes "personal-social" or "worldly-spiritual."

⁹ Master Sheng Yan, “What is needed is not too many while what is wanted is too many”, 18-8-2010 website.

Socialism is the perspective and orientation that takes the good of society as a whole as central, rather than one's personal, individualistic good as all important. Thus, socialism is the opposite of the individualism with which we are brainwashed today.

Dhammic Socialism is not slavish conformism, for it respects and nurtures individuals. However, the individual's purpose in life is not merely its own pleasure or success. In Dhammic Socialism, the individual's purpose and meaning is found beyond its little "self" in society, nature, and Dhamma.¹⁰

Holistic Buddhist economics View

Holistic view means the Middle Way (S. *madhyamā pratipad*, P. *majjhima paṭipadā*) , being free from all biased and wrong views.

All Buddhist traditions, from early Buddhism to Mahāyāna Buddhism or from Sūtric Buddhism to Tantric Buddhism, adopted the view of middle way in both theory and practice. The two Chinese Theravadin schools based on the theory of inter-dependent arising (S. *pratītya-samutpāda*, P. *paṭicca samuppanna*) to interpret middle way: The Kośa (Sarvāstivādaḥ) School suggested the eightfold noble paths and the twelve links of cause and effect as the middle way; the Satyasiddhi School used the theory of neither nihilism nor eternalism to represent the middle way. On the other hand, the eight Chinese Mahāyāna Schools based on the theory of emptiness (Śūnyatā) to interpret middle way. For example, the *Ratnakūṭa-sūtra* says:

The view of permanence is one side, and the view of impermanence is another. Permanence yet impermanence is the middle, no color and no form, no clarity and no knowing. This is called the view of middle way, the truth of all dharmas. The view of I is one side, and the view of no I is another. I yet no I is the middle, no color and no form, no clarity and no knowing. This is called the view of middle way, the truth of all dharmas.¹¹

This is the non-dualism, neither permanence nor impermanence, neither I nor no I, neither arising nor cessation, neither impurity nor purity, neither increase nor decrease, neither identity nor difference, neither coming nor going, etc.

In terms of economics, all Buddhist schools followed the middle way: neither sensual indulgence nor self-mortification, neither materialism nor spiritualism, neither individualism nor collectivism, being neither selfish nor non-selfish etc. Its ultimate goal is to attain nirvāṇa or everlasting peace and happiness by means of compassionate sharing and wholesome restraint. In some ways, it is the attainment of

¹⁰ Adapted from Suan Mokkh website.

¹¹ *Ratnakūṭa-sutra* f. 112, T. 11, No. 0310, 0633c.

personal Buddhahood and Blissful Land (Land of Suhāmatī, sukhāvatī, sukhāmatī, or sudhāmatī).

Compassionate Sharing

Compassion consists of two elements: loving-kindness (S. maitrya , maitri, P. metti) and pity (S. P. karuṇā). Loving-kindness means to love sentient beings and give them happiness; pity means to share the same feeling of sentient beings' affliction and uproot their affliction. Compassion is the door of Buddha path, and the thoughts of all Buddhas. *Mahā-paranirvāṇa-sūtra* says: "Loving-kindness is the very root of all virtues of all śrāvaka (P. śāvaka), pratyeka-buddha (P. pacceka-buddha) , bodhisattva (P. bodhisatta), and Buddha."¹² "The heart of all Buddhas is great compassion. They generate the unconditional loving-kindness to benefit the sentient beings."¹³ *Mahā-prajñāpāramita-śāstra* elucidated compassion vividly:

Compassion is the root of Buddha path. Why? Seeing the sentient beings' sufferings of birth, old age, sickness, and death, physical suffering, mental suffering, suffering of this life, suffering of future lives, etc., the bodhisattvas generate great compassion to end such sufferings, and then generate the mind to seek for the unparalleled concentration and enlightenment (S. anuttara-samyaksambodhi, P. anuttara-sammāsambodhi) . Also because of the power of great compassion, their minds don't fall into the trap of renunciation and loss in numberless rounds of birth and death; because of the power of great compassion, they don't attain nirvāṇa even though they could do it long time ago. Therefore, among the dharma of all Buddhas, compassion is the greatest.

If they don't have great compassion, they would enter nirvāṇa quite early.¹⁴

Compassion is the foundation of Buddha dharma, and supports the practice of Bodhisattva path. Compassion can be classified into three categories: compassion conditioned by the feeling of sentient beings, compassion conditioned by the understanding of reality, and compassion of no condition.¹⁵ Dāna pāramitā (perfection of giving or charity) is practiced out of the compassion of no condition. It is considered as one of the six thoughts a Buddhist should dwell on, and the first of the six or ten perfections a Bodhisattva should practice. There are three kinds of dāna: giving of property, giving of fearlessness, and giving of knowledge or wisdom. Dāna pāramitā means the perfect giving or the giving with transcendental wisdom, i.e. the giving with no single thought of giver, receiver and the things given.

Since compassion comes from the prajñā or perfect and transcendental wisdom,

¹² *Mahā-paranirvāṇa-sūtra* f. 15, T12, No. 0374, p.0456b.

¹³ *Amitāyur-dhyāna-sūtra*, T12, No. 0365, p. 0343b.

¹⁴ *Mahā-prajñāpāramita-śāstra* f. 27, T25, No. 1509, p.0256c.

¹⁵ *Ratnakūṭa-sutra*, f. 41, T11, No. 0310, p. 0236a.

dāna pāramitā can be called the compassionate sharing. In Chinese Buddhism, monastic community is a group of practitioners who follow the six points of reverent harmony or unity: bodily unity in form of worship, oral unity in chanting, mental unity in faith, moral unity in observing the commandments, doctrinal unity in views, and economic unity in community of goods, deeds, studies, or charity.¹⁶

The compassionate sharing can shorten the gap of the rich and the poor, and lessen people's greed, hatred, and ignorance, helping to build a peaceful world and sustainable economy.

Wholesome Restraint

Middle way is the golden mean of Buddhism in either theory or practice. In early Buddhism, the eightfold noble paths and the twelve links of cause and effect are regarded as the middle way. Among the eightfold noble paths, the fifth is the right livelihood (S. samyag-ājīva; P. sammā-ājīva) which abstains from any of the five forbidden modes of living: trading in animals for slaughter, dealing in weapons, dealing in slaves, dealing in poison and dealing in intoxicants.¹⁷

In the *Sūtra on the Twelve Disciplines*, the Buddha told Kaśyapa (P. Kassapa):

The bhikshus of quiet place (S. araṇya, P. araṇña) should detach from two kinds of attachment, be pure in body and mind, and practice the pure livelihood (S. dhūta, P. dhuta) which consists of twelve things: 1. Live in quiet place, 2. Always beg for alms, 3. Beg for alms orderly, 4. Take one meal a day, 5. Take limited amount of food, 6. No drinking after noontime, 7. Wear cast-off rags, 8. Wear only three garments, 9. Dwell among tombs, 10. Dwell under a tree, 11. Dwell in open place, and 12. Sit and no lying.¹⁸

The practice of dhūta implies recycling which can reduce large amount of waste and burden to the earth. If people can live simple life in clothing, food, accommodation, transportation and other daily necessities, our planet would not be exploited and devastated as today. Thus, we can enjoy everlasting peace, and comfortable life.

Conclusion

In Buddhism, both material life and spiritual life are emphasized equally. A Buddhist should not pursue spiritual liberation at the cost of material comfort. The Buddha attained enlightenment through neither sensual indulgence nor self-mortification, but middle way. The balanced body and mind via simple life are necessary for the practice of śīla, samādhi, and prajñā. This is the best guarantee of sustainable economy.

¹⁶ 《祖庭事苑》 *Zu-ting-shih-yuan* f. 5, X64, No. 1261, p. 0379b.

¹⁷ *Upāsaka-śīla-sūtra* f.1, T24, No. 1503, p.1119c.

¹⁸ *Sūtra on the Twelve Disciplines*, f. 1, T17, No. 0783, p. 0720c.

A Buddhist is encouraged to pursue, besides the material wealth, seven kinds of spiritual wealth: faith, precept, shamefulness, guilty feeling, listening to dharma talk, and wisdom.¹⁹ The material wealth can sustain one's bodily life, and the spiritual wealth can lead one to everlasting peace and happiness, i.e. nirvāṇa.

In Mahāyāna sūtras, the spiritual wealth is always considered as superior to the material wealth. For example, in the *Diamond Sūtra*, the Buddha said that the merit one obtain from accepting, observing, explaining, propagating or disseminating the sūtra or even its one verse is much greater than giving the seven kinds of treasure which can fill the numberless trilocosm.²⁰

¹⁹ Madhyama-agama-sūtra f. 9, T01, No. 0001, p. 0054b.

²⁰ The *Diamond Sūtra* (S. *Prājñāpāramitā-sūtra*) f1, T08, No. 0235, p. 0750a.