



STUDIES IN BUDDHIST ECONOMICS,  
MANAGEMENT, AND POLICY

# The Dharma and Socially Engaged Buddhist Economics

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Joel Magnuson

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# Studies in Buddhist Economics, Management, and Policy

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*In memory of Thich Nhat Hanh (1926–2022)*

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## Introduction

We are drifting into a perfect storm. Ours is an era during which global warming, massive species extinction, extreme polarization of wealth distribution, the ascent of violently reactionary politics and divisiveness, and grand episodes of economic instability are on a path of convergence. The common element among all these crises is that they are all anthropogenic. Meaning self-inflicted. A concern raised here is that so many of us are becoming numb to our self-inflicted wounds and bury our heads in the sands of cognitive dissonance as a way of avoiding anxiety. And like so many mythological “boiling frogs” accepting these pathological system conditions as the new normal. By doing so, finding solutions and ways to heal become increasingly difficult.

To address some aspects of these converging conditions and crises, this book presents a case for Buddhist economics, or what I am specifically calling Socially Engaged Buddhist Economics. One main theme that runs through this project is that Buddhism can help us make positive changes in our economic systems and thereby help address our anthropogenic crises. Specifically, it provides a philosophical basis for dual process of transformation. One part of the process is to look deeply inward into our minds and spirit to dissolve and liberate ourselves from the internal vexations that make us suffer—the inner work. The other is to extend from this place of liberation to work toward liberating our social and economic

systems from the same vexations—the outer work. This dual process of inner and outer liberation becomes the basis for transformation of our economic lives.

Transformation is the very essence of Buddhism: the transformation of personal suffering into wellbeing, and socially engaged Buddhism gives this process of transformation a social dimension. It is cultivating a Buddhist practice directed towards fundamentally changing the conditions in our social milieu where systemic problems are arguably salient and worsening. It draws support from the Dharma, the vast catalog of Buddhist wisdom, though specifically forged from two key aspects: the social ontology of interconnectedness and the temporal dimension of karma.

Interconnectedness in the social context implies is another way of saying that we are all interdependent. Clair Brown in her book, *Buddhist Economics: An Enlightened Approach to the Dismal Science* (2017) she writes,

Interdependence in Buddhist economics is expressed in three ways. The first involves using resources to enhance the quality of life for ourselves and for others. The second integrates caring for Nature and our environment into all activities. And the third involves reducing suffering and practicing compassion, both locally and globally.<sup>1</sup>

As we work with this kind of caring and compassion, the effect over time is karmic and cumulative. We make progress and improve our condition. To move toward this enlightened approach requires a comprehensive framework for economic action, policy, and reflection.

In his youth, the Buddha ventured out into the world and witnessed a ubiquity of human suffering. He observed that so many people languished under the grip of *inner* vexations of the mind and *outer* material conditions of poverty. Filled with compassion, he embarked on a lifelong journey of discovery and teaching to find ways to liberate humanity from such suffering that has both inner and outer origins. Some of his earliest teachings were focused on what we would now call economic issues in the sense that he advocated that wellbeing could be cultivated by pursuing a *middle way* between poverty and opulence and a *right*

<sup>1</sup> Brown, Clair, *Buddhist Economics: An Enlightened Approach to the Dismal Science* (NY: Bloomsbury Press, 2017), p. 8.

*livelihood* committed to making a living without doing harm to others—including nature and future generations. Such a path toward liberation necessarily involves individuals dissolving their vexations of the mind that stem from attachment, greed, hatred, or aggression, and delusion as a starting place. But the inner work alone is not enough to liberate the whole of society from suffering. Completing the journey to wellbeing also requires transforming our economy and society with the same effort of dissolving greed, hatred, and delusion of the mind as they have become embodied in our socio-economic systems. The emphasis in this book therefore is to make a case for the inner work of dissolving defilements of the mind while simultaneously doing the outer work of making positive changes in our economic system. It is important to note that many Buddhists see their practice as very individualistic in which their practice is focused on liberating themselves from personal vexations, while engaged Buddhists are compelled to extend their practice into the social realm and work toward social change for the better. The goals of both the inner and outer work are to secure the wellbeing of people and the flourishing of the life-giving qualities of nature and to transform pathological systems into healthy ones crafted in the spirit of right livelihood.

In a normative sense, this Buddhist way toward wellbeing shares an affinity with what institutional economists call social provisioning. Evolving toward a system that provides for genuine wellbeing of the population requires maintaining an economic society that exists to mobilize resources to provide food, housing, health care, education, security in retirement, and all the other things required to sustain people living healthy and meaningful lives. These are paramount priorities. Such a view of social provisioning is a first principle in institutional economics. To achieve social provisioning in a genuine way would require a transformation of what institutional economist Thorstein Veblen calls “habits of thought” as well as transformation in the economic milieu that is dominated by what he calls “the interests.” For Veblen, the interests are giant corporations that hold social provisioning as secondary or incidental to profit-making and shareholder value.

The principles of Buddhism and institutional economics also share an affinity with the philosophy of pragmatism developed by the American philosophers John Dewey, George H. Mead, and others. Dewey and Mead set out to build a philosophy based on a foundation of social action put in the service of humanity. He also makes a case for

human social behavior that springs from an existential drive, not for ego-aggrandizement, but to shape the world in positive ways. If people seek an economy that is grounded in social provisioning in the pragmatic sense, Buddhist philosophy and practice can be enormously helpful. The Buddhist practice of *mindfulness* can also help as a kind of reality check by simply observing and asking pragmatic questions: Is our outer work in the economy helpful for social provisioning? If not, then why are we doing it? Or, are we doing it because inwardly we remain captured by our attachments and the defilements of greed, hatred, and delusion?

The chapters that follow explore various facets of socially engaged Buddhist economics including a serious examination of institutionalized greed, hatred, and delusion; a more holistic economic paradigm for analysis; a philosophical framework that explores the affinities between pragmatism, institutional economics, and Buddhism; linking economics to the ecodharma movement; debate on Buddhist mindfulness vs. McMindfulness; a proposal for new kinds of economic institutions that I call Right Livelihood Institutions; and the tell the stories of initiatives taken by Bhutan and Thailand as examples of high-level outer work in engaged Buddhism. The upshot of all of this material is the message that there is much in Buddhist economics that can help societies everywhere grasp and cope with the overwhelming environmental and social crises bearing down on the contemporary world.

What professor Brown and I and others have been working toward is a complete paradigm of Buddhist economics. As it stands today, the aspect of Buddhism that is engaged in political, environmental, or economic issues—socially engaged Buddhism—lacks such a paradigm (Chapter Two). This is sorely needed as we consider that the anthropogenic nature of the crises involved derive from economic activity. Global warming, being the most severe environmental concern today, is generated from a long history of production and consumption powered by burning fossil fuels. In other words, we are working toward building an economic paradigm, nestled in the Buddhist vision of transforming the way our economies operate and the way we live. In the pages of this volume, we refer to this paradigm as Socially Engaged Buddhist Economics.

One of the first steps as well as one of the steepest challenges for Socially Engaged Buddhist Economics to confront the deeply rooted condition of institutionalized greed, hatred, and delusion (Chapter Three). In his very first sermons, the Buddha warned that these are the three fires that burn within us and cause a great deal of suffering. It is

one thing to see a Buddhist practice as an individualized discipline of developing the skills to liberate ourselves from greed, hatred, and delusion for a healthier way of living, but it is quite another to recognize that they are also embedded in our institutional fabric. This is the product of generations, if not centuries, of social habituation karmically passed down from one generation to the next. Socially Engaged Buddhist Economics does recognize this and rises to the paramount challenge of confronting and working toward social change in our social structures. Such change or transformation is carried out in the social milieu with the same diligence as it is with individual practice. Seen in this way, Socially Engaged Buddhist Economics is about doing both the inner work of a traditional Buddhist practice while also doing the outer work of social change in the spirit of interdependence. Specifically, this involves dissolving the vexations of greed, hatred, and delusion as the most destructive elements in our corporate-dominated social milieu. In the karmic sense, this is an evolutionary process of transforming our economic institutions and transforming how we act and think in the world.

If we seek to transform in this way, then we are faced with the challenge of embracing a total paradigm shift in economic thought (Chapter Four). The standard economic paradigm in the West is structured around the classical liberal ideology of John Locke, David Hume, and Adam Smith along with mechanistic, mathematical framework developed by Isaac Newton. Inherent in this paradigm is a vision of fundamentalist individualism, or social atomism. In this vision, there is no such thing as society, only individual producers and consumers acting autonomously in the open fields of the free market. All individuals are held to be essentially passive and only inspired to action by shifting market signals. Insofar as societies do not exist, producers and consumers are unburdened of social responsibility. They are free to pursue economic self-interest without having to give undue attention to social or environmental consequences. The orthodoxy of this paradigm derives from its function as an ideological justification for the institutions of corporate capitalism, which in its current form is dominated by Wall Street and Fortune 500 enterprises.

To make a paradigm shift from this to Buddhist economics, however, does not require reinventing the wheel. A significantly different paradigm based on holism, systems, and evolution has been developed by institutional economics, which is considered heterodox (Chapter Five). Beginning in the late nineteenth century, with the work of Thorstein Veblen and others, institutional economics evolved into a social, humanistic

theory of economics embodied in modern science and rigorous statistical modeling. The main body of this work was done at the University of Chicago in the early twentieth century where these economists joined forces with the American pragmatists. The integration of these two American schools of philosophy and economics combined to form a holistic social theory par excellence. Moreover, as we will uncover here, these two schools of thought share a remarkable affinity with contemporary Buddhist social thought. Drawing from Veblen and others, a central theme that runs throughout this book is that institutional fabric of society is the foundation for how economies are structured and operate. Institutions are powerful aspects of the whole of culture and are the laws, mores, norms, or rules that we live by.

Another dimension to Socially Engaged Buddhist Economics is the work of E.F. Schumacher and a small gathering of Anglo-American intellectuals that I call the “meta economists” (Chapter Six). Meta-economics is a vision that is not necessarily grounded in formal economic theory but rather extends beyond traditional theoretical frameworks to consider ethics, moral commitments, norms, values, and consciousness. Together their work challenges the metaphysical foundation of modern economic thought. Mechanistic representations in standard economics are seen here as distorted and stunted representations of human sociality. It also allows for the indulgence of our most base, reptilian instincts for predation and aggression while ignoring the most salient aspects of the human species—our spiritual and altruistic nature. Schumacher was inspired by nineteenth-century British meta-economists such as John Ruskin, William Morris, and Patrick Geddes. Together with twentieth century American kindred spirits such as Lewis Mumford and Schumacher and the other meta-economists form a very different perspective on economics with a more exalted view of human potential along with a proposition for economic development that would incorporate what he called “technology with a human face.” For Schumacher, the goal of technological development ought to be the lightening of our burden and enhancing the joy of work. Technology has not done this. It has lightened the burden of work in certain places by making it heavier in others. Tremendous systems of mass production remove the intrinsic joy that good work can bring and replace it with meaningless, joyless, assembly line toil, and deskilled labor in sweatshops.

What Ruskin, Morris, and Geddes envisioned as a society grounded in creative adaptation, cooperation, and the love of crafts and nature

was being drummed out in favor of domination, profit-making, and mass production. Combined they present a sophisticated social vision with practical concerns of civic participation, appropriate forms of technology and scales of production systems, aesthetics, a reverence for human creativity, and a social/spiritual vision of human ecology. These too have an affinity with Buddhist philosophy and social thought.

Such a vision of human ecology is part of the core substance in David Loy's and others' project of ecodharma (Chapter Seven). Ecodharma is the merging of the Dharma with the science of ecology. Loy and the others involved in this project have presented contemporary Buddhism with a challenge: to become more involved in socially engaged actions related to global warming or become irrelevant. The data as well as real-time environmental catastrophes stemming from global warming are no longer deniable. The severity of crises is such that no one can be neutral, and the Dharma can be very helpful for those seeking to be involved. Engagement of a broad base of population is crucial and the current state of climate crisis is no time for lip service or half measures. Our species must be firmly on track to change our way of life or be forced to face our bloody and painful extinction.

Among the most compelling aspects of a Buddhist practice is its emphasis on doing the inner work of training the mind with mindfulness (Chapter Eight). One of the many powers of mindfulness is that it is a useful skill for reality checks by developing greater awareness of what is happening around us with a measure of objectivity. One such check is the ability to see clearly that what we consider to be our normal way of life is making us suffer. So many of us hold on to a fiction or shibboleth of "rugged individualism" while holding a vision of ourselves fundamentally disconnected from one another. What becomes of individualism is an asocial view of how we live and work. It is a pretense, a vestige of nineteenth-century ideological superstition that social interdependence does not actually exist. As such it is not difficult to extrapolate from such a pretense to sociopathy.

For Socially Engaged Buddhist Economics, the goal is to see ourselves not as separated from others the process of breaking free from this condition begins with the inner work of training the mind and living mindfully. Mindfulness is indispensable in this regard. It is a healing energy that allows us to step outside the vicious circle of thinking and acting with vexations, and projecting those vexations into the social firmament, which in turn will exert problematic influence on our ways of thinking and

acting. But like so many other things that hold great value, mindfulness is in danger of becoming commodified in our corporate-dominated society. Such commodification or commercialization is identified by business professor and author, Ron Purser in his book *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality* (2019). Purser argues that once it is stripped of its most potent aspect—the power to transform our minds—it is being dumbed down to self-help fads full of gimmicky workshops designed to help people cope with job stress.

In a more authentic sense, mindfulness can be effective inner work that can empower people to participate in the process of building new economic institutions based on a system of ethics (Chapter Nine). The system of ethics is derived from the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. Individually, such institutional alternatives are not going to change the world. But if we begin to look things holistically, in the spirit of codetermination, we can begin to develop a vision and framework for real change in which each of these alternatives play a role in affecting in transforming the pathological system we have now into the kind of system most of us want.

The project of real change was not lost on the monarchs of the Buddhist kingdoms of Bhutan and Thailand (Appendix). Both countries have a majority Buddhist population, maintain a strong Buddhist heritage and culture, and are not shy about seeking institutional change that stands outside the mainstream if necessary. They have been the source of inspiration for the rest of the world in terms of what kinds of positive change can become manifest with serious commitment to social, political, and economic transformation. It is hard to imagine a better time than the present to see what we can learn from these examples of applied Buddhism.

Future historians will look back on our current period with sadness and wonder why we with all our intelligence and technology failed to do something about existential crises such as climate change before it was too late. Future Buddhist will also reflect with sadness if the Buddhists of the world were to maintain aloofness and without the interest or energy to be a part of social change. For this reason, and for the moral responsibility, we have to our future generations, all of us—Buddhists or otherwise—have to be forward-thinking and proactive into doing what is central to this spiritual tradition, transforming suffering into wellbeing. The emphasis here is on stepping on to another economic path with the intention to build a framework for how we act in the world and how



we think about the world economically. The Socially Engaged Buddhist Economics movement is directed at thoroughgoing systemic change, but the path toward change begins with local, community-based institutional development where people have the most control and can be most effective. It is local action and engagement that is intertwined with a holistic consciousness and an awareness that our every action is linked to every other as we tread our way through the twenty-first century. To that end, the chapters that follow explore various aspects of the inner and outer work of Socially Engaged Buddhist Economics including theory and practice. The normative aspiration for exploring all this material is seek a way that Buddhist economics can help societies everywhere grasp and cope with the overwhelming environmental and social crises bearing down on the contemporary world.

## REFERENCE

Brown, Clair, *Buddhist Economics: An Enlightened Approach to the Dismal Science* (NY: Bloomsbury Press, 2017).



## Socially Engaged Buddhism and Economics

As with all aspects of Buddhism, socially engaged Buddhism is about working toward the liberation of all beings from the conditions of suffering. The notion of suffering in Buddhism is often misunderstood as a fatalistic condition from which there is no escape. Perhaps the misunderstanding comes from the inherent difficulty of translating into modern language the ancient texts that themselves were accounts of the oral tradition of the Buddha's teachings. Be that as it may, what we now generally accept as the notion of human suffering in Buddhism is a spectrum of conditions that have taken a wrong turn. In this text, I refer to these conditions as pathology.

The English word *pathology* derives from the ancient Greek root of *pathos*, meaning the experience of suffering. Generally, now the term applies to medical science and the study of disease, but in a broader sense it simply means conditions of suffering. We may not understand why or how the conditions arise, but we know that they are wrong somehow as we can identify agony, pain, fear, anxiety, sickness, or injustice. Working toward liberation is the process of freeing ourselves from these pathological conditions, however, mild or severe.

Socially engaged Buddhism is work that is leveraged from a doctrinal foundation. The first piece of which is the recognition that suffering exists. Once there is this recognition, the work extends to finding the

sources of suffering that we bring on ourselves—individually and socially. If we take a glance at our historical record, we can tally up an impressive list of examples of how humans have a penchant for self-destruction. Global warming is undoubtedly the most pernicious condition of pathology of the twenty-first century, and one that promises to worsen with no end in sight. It has arisen as a result of our dependency on fossil fuel energy that is blanketing our atmosphere with carbon dioxide, which is overheating the planet and destroying the environmental habitat that otherwise sustains us. Such destruction is a condition that we are bringing down on ourselves; that is, it is a system condition that is anthropogenic. Anthropogenic causality is the reality of an event that is caused by human activity. There are some forms of suffering that are not anthropogenic such as aging and all the pain and discomfort that comes with it, but there is much that is, such as conditions of poverty, social injustice, or ecological breakdown. The first step toward liberation for socially engaged Buddhism is to realize and identify this reality.

If people can make such a realization, the next step in the work is to make commitment to real and lasting change. This involves tracing the social pathology to the sources in specific habituated patterns of thought and action, then uproot these patterns through a dedicated to a program of change grounded in a system of ethics and practice. Buddhist ethics are a set of guidelines that suggest ways of thinking, communicating, and living that can guide us along a different path away from pathology and destruction toward healthier ways of thinking and behaving in society. Toward wellbeing.

Most of what is considered a Buddhist practice is directed at the work of individual liberation from suffering—to look inward into our own individual minds and dissolve the vexations lurking there that lead to suffering. But, as Zen teacher David Loy shows us, there is “an extraordinary parallel between our usual individual predicament and our present collective situation.”<sup>1</sup> The collective situation is specifically the social and environmental malaise caused by global warming, social injustice, human rights violations, social and economic inequality, and conflict. The vexations we find in ourselves are also found in our social milieu—a collective sense of alienation and a collective attempt to react to this alienation in

<sup>1</sup> Loy, David, “Ecodharma: A New Buddhist Path?,” *Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies*, 2020, No. 15, p. 53.

destructive and even violent ways.<sup>2</sup> Yet at the same time there is the possibility of a collective realization and a collective movement toward liberation. If we collectively get ourselves into social and environmental trouble, we must collectively get ourselves out and Buddhism can help. This is the essence of socially engaged Buddhism.

## PEACE ACTIVISM

Much of the work of contemporary socially engaged Buddhism has been focused on peace activism. Zen master, teacher, and writer Thich Nhat Hanh is one of the originators of socially engaged Buddhism and peace of activism. His work began when he and other young Buddhists created the Order of Interbeing during the Vietnam War in the 1960s. These young Vietnamese Buddhist monks took direct action to help their fellow countrymen who suffered from the violence and destruction of war. The Order organized and mobilized volunteers to rebuild villages that were destroyed by American bombing, created farmers' cooperatives, and established health clinics.<sup>3</sup>

During the war, Nhat Hanh shared his view with Americans and emphasized that Americans “were not the only ones responsible... Our individual consciousness is a product of our society, ancestors, education, and many other factors...”<sup>4</sup> What was happening to villagers in Vietnam was happening to everyone as karmic conditions working their way through time. Like leaves of a tree, it seems senseless for one leaf to admonish another for changing colors. All are part of the same human conditions with a shared history. Nhat Hanh went on to say, “If we divide reality into two camps... and stand in one camp while attacking the other, the world will never have peace. We will always blame those we feel are responsible for war and social injustice, without recognizing the degree of violence in ourselves. We must work on ourselves and with those we condemn to have a real impact.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 56–57.

<sup>3</sup> Queen, Christopher, “Introduction: A New Buddhism,” in Queen, Christopher, ed., *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000), p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Hunt-Perry, Patricia and Fine, Lyn, “All Buddhism Is Engaged: Thich Nhat Hanh and the Order of Interbeing,” In Queen, Christopher, ed., *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000), p. 47.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, and other prominent Buddhist leaders have similarly advocated for empathic engagement for nonviolence. As they deliberately focus on nonviolent social change, they inspire people from all over the world with their humanity as well as by personally modeling how to be engaged in complex and daunting issues such as political violence, environmental destruction, and social injustice from a place of compassion and joy rather than anger, blame, and fear. He also has been outspoken regarding climate change and the specific threats it poses to Tibet with glacier melting. At the Paris Climate Conference in 2015, the Dalai Lama presented a video in which he stated that although we humans, “despite of a lot of development—we have technology, science, and these things—however, we also created more human-made problems... for those problems, which human beings created, it is logically [that] we human beings have the responsibility to reduce these problems and finally eliminate these problems.”<sup>6</sup>

These leaders and virtually all Buddhists who are seriously involved in social engagement see their involved dharma practice in terms of doing both inner and outer work. Venerable Phra Prayudh Payutto notes that peace activism is central to engaged Buddhism primarily “because Buddhism itself, the whole of it, is concerned with peace.” But he adds that both the individual’s inner work of cultivating a condition of peace within and the outer work of cultivating societal conditions for peace are necessary. Payutto emphasizes that “In order to have peace outside we must have peace inside... those who have happiness inside tend to radiate happiness outside also.”<sup>7</sup>

Nonviolence movements need to do more than just renounce violence. There is a distinction between renouncing violence and being actively engaged in achieving nonviolence. Active steps need to be taken to eliminate the conditions of poverty, hatred, injustice, or xenophobia that create the circumstances that can lead to violence in the first place. Buddhist activist John McConnell argues that a dharma practice, “... is not a set of dogma to be believed, but a way of beginning, here and now, with the mess we have made of our lives, and turning things around.”<sup>8</sup> We can

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYBMLsc64HM>.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in “The Madhupindika Sutta and the Reality of Conflict,” in *Socially Engaged Buddhism for the New Millennium*, p. 324.

<sup>8</sup> John McConnell, “The Realism of Applying Damma to Situations of Conflict,” in *Socially Engaged Buddhism for the New Millennium*, p. 315.

look inward and dissolve the vexations that lead to violent actions, but we can also look outward to dissolve the pathological social conditions that spawn and reinforce those actions.

McConnell and others turn to the inner work of mindfulness as a way of developing the will and concentration to help resolve conflict, yet at the same time realizing that striving for social change must be part of their dharma practice. The state of world affairs and climate change make such that it is no longer possible to measure the quality of a Buddhist practice in terms of individual goals, holding certain beliefs, or individual observance of traditions. The scale and complexity of social, economic, and environmental crises have compelled many Buddhists to do the outer work of engaging in public service or political activism, and to elevate their practice to a broader sphere of social experience as a way to serve the ultimate cause of peace both within and among peoples.

The scope of socially engaged Buddhism is not limited to peace activism and extends to addressing a host of other dimensions to social and environmental malaise. Engagement is predicated on an awareness that suffering is not just an individual condition, but it is also systemic as it originates in social and ecological conditions that have allowed suffering to fester and become more complex in time. For the transformation toward wellbeing, social transformation must be part of the movement. The process of changing society first begins with work on the self yet remaining mindfully present with affecting social change. Zen master Philip Kapleau reflects on this, “To help people without hurting them at the same time, or hurting yourself, means that we must first work on ourselves.” He uses the term *middle way* as a kind of metaphor, “A Middle Way that alternates between the life of inward meditation and the life of action-in-the-world...”<sup>9</sup>

The dharma practice of socially engaged Buddhism can be seen as having two aspects, the inner work of individual transformation from suffering to wellbeing and the outer work of social transformation of suffering to wellbeing. Like all things in complex systems, there is a dual nature to our existence: our individual selves and our social selves that are inextricably tied to social structures. If the individual is a kind of social

<sup>9</sup> Kapleau, Philip, “Responsibility and Social Action,” in Kaza, Stephanie and Kraft, Kenneth, eds., *Dharma Rain: Sources of Buddhist Environmentalism*, (Boston: Shambala, 2000), p. 243.

molecule, then social institutions and cultures are the higher-level structures. Change happens at both levels continuously, whether we intend so or not, in a complex and dialectic process of interplay between the social self and social formations.

The inner work of changing ourselves and the outer work of changing our society are taking place simultaneously in a dialectical process. In the Buddhist view, all is impermanent and changing. We are undergoing a continuous transformation through processes of aging, adapting to our surroundings, and forming social relationships. We are steadily changing by virtue of our experiences in society and by the choices we make. If there are changes in the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, then we change accordingly. If we make choices to change the kind of food we eat or the places we live, we change our surroundings. As our society changes, we change and as we change society changes. Nothing is permanent.

We are all having an impact on everything we touch. In the sense of impact, it is always there whether intentional or not. In this way, we are shaping our social and environmental context, and in turn the context is continuously shaping who and what we are. We are embedded in our surroundings and our surroundings are embedded in us. As we live and breathe on the crust of the earth, we are engaged in everything around us, and this is so from the time we are born to the time we die. None of us lives in isolation; we can only shift from one state or degree of connectedness to another. The main question for what we call “engaged Buddhism” is how we can direct this two-way dialectic through conscious volition.

Thich Nhat Hanh’s conception of what he calls “interbeing” exemplifies this dialectical interconnectedness at a deep level. A cornerstone doctrine of Buddhist philosophy is *dependent origination*, which we’ll explore in more detail later, but is basically the realization that nothing is discrete. All forms of being are conditional in the sense that all things—mental or physical, human or natural, individual or social—depend on all other things for their existence. Things exist as formations or entities arising from certain external conditions, or they cease to exist when those conditions are removed. When we attest to the basic condition that everything is connected to everything else, we also become aware that our actions affect everything else. How we think and act in the world is the same as how we are in the world, which is the same as how we make

the world, which influences how we think and act. A circle of karmic responsibility.

Karma is the cause-and-effect way of things that works through the space–time continuum. Three-dimensional space is the environmental and social context of human existence where everything is connected, and the time dimension is the unfolding of change. Human action is conditioned both by the circumstances of our physical, environmental, and social surroundings at a spot in time as well as the conditioning of change through time. The connection between dependent origination and karma illuminates a fundamental reality that we are creating a world that we inherited and is not of our creation. Socially engaged Buddhism emphasizes an awareness of karmic cause and effect relationships. When all things, including people, depend on all other things, the volitional action of one affects all others. Karma works holistically and universally through time. Everything is relational including the nature of social change itself.

What we do individually and how we do it affects others now and in the future. We are engaged in a social context that has been karmically conditioned by the cumulative actions of our own past as well as the past of others, and we are conditioning the social context of the future by the actions we take in the present moment. Engaged Buddhism emphasizes the need to do the inner work and be fully attentive and mindful in the present moment of our own motivations and intentions, and of the outer work of our actions. Our motivations, intentions, and actions have karmic repercussions. The impact may be either imperceptible or dramatic, small or big, and has a cause-and-effect relationship with everything else.

The motivation-intentions-actions of the present moment will create new conditions that will either lead toward liberation from suffering, *nirvana*, or toward more suffering, *samsara*. Engaged Buddhism emphasizes intentional actions directed at making changes in both the immediate context and on impacting future beings. These are actions compelled by intentions, which have immutable implications in time. Depending on the temperament that give rise to the intentions and actions, the implications could lead to more suffering or less. A temperament imbued with greed, hatred, or delusion can lead to more suffering in some way or another, whereas a temperament arising from loving-kindness, compassion, and wisdom can lead to less suffering and authentic wellbeing. American Buddhist monk and scholar Bhikkhu Bodhi describes that “In addition to giving a clear, explicit account of the conditional structure of the liberative progression, this sutta has the further advantage of bringing



the supramundane form of dependent arising into immediate connection with its familiar samsaric counterpart.” That is, karma is always in motion and the direction of its movement is dependent on the conditions we create. “By making this connection it brings into prominence the comprehensive character of the principle of conditionality.”<sup>10</sup>

The inner work is to foster clarity of understanding of where we are, what are we doing, and where we are going. As we will see in a later chapter, the inner work of Buddhism, mindfulness in particular, helps cultivate such awareness of ourselves, our thoughts, and our surroundings. As we become more aware we begin to see more clearly the causality between karmic volition and impact the actions—the outer work—we have willed into being have in our social and environmental milieu. In Buddhist practice traditionally, much of the emphasis has been on karma in individual experience and liberation, but socially engaged Buddhism extends to societal experience. Both are important for Buddhist economics. People who live in societies where there is some measure of democratic accountability have a sense of the malleability of their political institutions. By virtue of universal suffrage, all citizens can vote, sign petitions, run for office, protest, or volunteer on campaigns in order to bring about changes in those societies.

Engaged Buddhism identifies forces in the human world that can lead to violence, poverty, injustice, crime, etc., then takes action to eliminate or change those forces. Environmental protections, civil rights, health care services, and social security are provisions brought about by citizen engagement. Without such engagement, life would be much like it was in the nineteenth century with rampant poverty, injustice, instability, and perhaps even slavery. Such democratic political institutions did not come into being by chance, they came into being by engagement and collective volition—the collective will of the people. By virtue of karmic volition, our living generations are the beneficiaries of the good karma brought about by the hard work and determination of preceding generations. Whether or not these institutions remain intact or are improved upon depends on the will, intentions, and engagement of us living here and now.

<sup>10</sup> Bhikkhu, Bodhi, “Transcendental Dependent Arising: A Translation and Exposition of the Upanisa Sutta”. Access to Insight (BCBS Edition). 1 December 2013. <https://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/wheel277.html>.

Herein lies the importance of the inner work. In the Buddhist tradition, much of what can be identified as motivation-intention-action that bring *samsaric* conditions stem from psychic pathologies of greed, hatred, and delusion. For a mind that is untrained in the work of mindfulness, it becomes cluttered with desires, resentments, and fears that coagulate around the ego. The world with which we interact becomes a shadowy and fearful place and becomes a stage upon which insatiable desire, addiction, rage, aggression, and cognitive dissonance become powerful motivating forces. These forces color the intentions and actions of individuals.

Individual behavior becomes covetous, grasping, aggressive, and even predatory. What follows is outer work that gives rise to violence, social instability, and ecological crises—general *samsara*.

A Buddhist spiritual practice involves disengaging from our personal selves (our egos) and examining our mental state and its bearing on our motivations and intentions, which then shape our action in the world. Much of what we see in engaged Buddhism is an examination with self-compassion into our state of mind and the behavior that is willed into being as a result of that state. With mindfulness practice we develop the skillful means—a skill set of motivations, intentions, and actions that are liberated from egoism—from which peaceable and creative work naturally flows. To some extent, we are all individually responsible for our mental states and emotions just as we are responsible for our intentions, actions, and consequences that follow.

Such a sense of karmic responsibility extends to the economic consequences of our actions. If we find ourselves absorbed by the passions of greed, hatred, and delusion then destructive economic behavior follows.

## ECONOMICS AND THE BUDDHA

Much of what stands as Buddhist economics deals with the “three fires” of greed, aggression, and delusion, and how it can help us find a way clear from the flames and find peace. Buddhist teachings can offer insight into our motivations, sharpen our abilities to see into them deeply, and, perhaps most importantly, change them. These insights can eventually lead to a profound sense of liberation and self-awareness that stems from a gradual process of dissolving the confusion between what is harmful economic activity and what is truly beneficial. Such insights provide a foundation for both a living model of ethics and social change. As a first

step, it is important that we take a brief glimpse into how the Buddha came to see the world in a profoundly liberating way.

The root narrative of Buddhist economics naturally traces back to the extraordinary personal story of Siddhartha Gautama, the man who became the Buddha about two-and-half millennia ago. Siddhartha lived in splendid comfort and luxury as the chosen son to succeed his father as head of the Shakya dynasty that was sovereign over a vast territory in a border region between India and Nepal. As a boy and young man, he lived in splendid luxury with all the comforts and privilege imaginable in his time. Yet he was discontent and there was something inside him that compelled to find a deeper more meaningful truth of life outside his cloister of dynastic privilege. He occasionally wandered outside of his palatial home into nearby villages where he bore witness to a mass of human population sinking into a vortex of poverty and disease. Upon return he also bore witness to the wealthy and powerful frantic with anxiety, jealousy, fear, and an insatiable desire for more. The wealthy and poor alike were suffering.

Siddhartha realized that there was answer to what seemed to be a universal condition of misery and the answer had nothing to do with the material standards of living. He also realized that in order to find that answer he had to let go of his own wealth, the status of his house, and even his own family. Siddhartha contemplated,

The thought came to me. The household life, this place of impurity, is narrow... It is not easy for a householder to lead the perfected, utterly pure and perfect holy life. What if I were now to cut off my hair and beards, don yellow robes, and go forth from the household into homelessness?<sup>11</sup>

And he did just that. He took on the task of outer work wholeheartedly. For a time the young man lived a life of homelessness and serious poverty. Siddhartha disavowed his wealth and status and became a mendicant wanderer in an arduous quest for truth, and to uncover the way to transform suffering into wellbeing. He survived largely by begging and drifted from one place to another seeking instruction from various masters on yoga, meditation, and every other form of practice he could

<sup>11</sup> Majjhima, Nikaya, translated as *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, by Bhikku Nanamoli, (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2nd ed., 2001), p. 335.