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# **Hunger is the Worst Disease;**

## **Conceptions of Poverty and Poverty Relief in Buddhist Social Ethics**

**By**

**Jason McLeod Monson**

**PhD Dissertation, University of Glasgow, Department of Religious Studies and Theology**

**Research Supervisors: Ms. Julie Clague and Prof. Perry Schmidt-Leukel**

**Reviewed by: Prof. Peter Harvey (Sunderland University) and**

**Dr. Leon Robinson (University of Glasgow)**

My interest in poverty and poverty relief did not begin as an academic study, but more as a visceral concern about a reality of the human condition that called for further attention. Growing up, I knew my father had been raised in extreme poverty at the end of the Great Depression. After he was born, he was taken home to the tent in which his parents raised their large family through the harsh Utah winters and blistering summers until they moved into an abandoned box car, before eventually building a home, partially out of scrap wood. Fortunately, and largely thanks to his hard work and determination to provide a better future for his own family, I never knew first-hand the poverty he was raised in. Like virtually everyone who reads this dissertation and unlike most of the world's population throughout human history, by mere chance I was born into a family in a time and place where shelter, food, healthcare, and an education were available to us—not to mention clean water, electricity, basic security and protections, and so forth. When I was in high school, I began volunteering at a homeless shelter in Salt Lake City, Utah; it was there that I first confronted the reality of extreme poverty face to face. The first real epiphany came with the realization that many of the people I met there had found themselves waiting in line for a room at a family homeless shelter by and large because of circumstances beyond their own control. Even in an affluent nation, homelessness and poverty is the lot of many people from a variety of backgrounds and for a variety of reasons; it seemed it could happen to anyone.

The prevalence and threat of poverty only became clearer and more striking as I conducted research with two microcredit organizations, the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh and Katalysis Partnership in California, as part of an internship while studying international development management in graduate school. While I had come to identify the poverty I had witnessed in the U.S. as an indication of an institutional failure of sorts, I had not seen it at the systemic level of impoverished nations or regions. Global poverty pointed to failure at a massive level. I was aware of some of the different approaches to conceptualizing

the problem of global poverty, as well as leading theories and strategies of poverty alleviation. These did not, however, prepare me to confront the soul-crushing conditions of the world's poorest in rural Bangladesh. That experience led me to think of global poverty primarily as an indication of a collective moral failure. There is much to be done, but due to its far-reaching nature, to some degree poverty must be addressed at a global level through collective efforts. My intention with this dissertation is to help facilitate a better understanding of poverty and ways of conceptualizing poverty and poverty relief by examining it through the lens of a widely known but relatively unexamined perspective and that by doing so this might also help engender a greater compassion toward those who suffer, especially in motivating us all genuinely to strive to help those that we are in a position to help.

My thanks first go to Prof. Perry Schmidt-Leukel for agreeing to supervise my research in spite of my initial lack of training in the field of religious studies. Having come from a 'more practical' approach to studying poverty and international development, I had not previously studied religion at the graduate level. Nevertheless, Perry immediately recognized the value in research on the topic of poverty relief and Buddhist ethics, and encouraged me to pursue it from the earliest stages of applying to the university, through reading and commenting on my dissertation chapters—and even remaining willing to do so after he accepted a post at another university and was no longer bound to. Secondly, I need to thank Julie Clague, who also supervised my research from beginning to end. Julie's expertise in the confluence of religion, social ethics, and international development, and her constant encouragement and support throughout the writing process were essential to my completing this dissertation. If the project wouldn't have begun without Perry, it wouldn't have concluded without Julie.

Thanks also to Blaine Johnson, with whom I worked on Paramita Group/Human Security International, whose interests in bringing innovative development strategies to Tibetan and Burmese refugee camps

first introduced me to many of the issues in Buddhist thought and poverty studies that I discuss in this dissertation.

And certainly, above all, thanks to my family for their support. My wife Camille happily moved our little family around the world, made a new home for us, and gave birth to our youngest child through our own very real trials of indebtedness and poverty in graduate studies. Without her encouragement, I may not have ever applied for PhD studies.

Hunger is the worst disease, conditioned things the worst suffering.  
Knowing this as it really is, the wise realize Nibbana, the highest bliss.

- Dhp 203

Namo Buddhaya!

May all beings be free from  
suffering and the causes of suffering.

Namo Buddhaya!

May all beings be free from  
disease and the causes of disease.

Namo Buddhaya!

May all beings be free from  
hunger and the causes of hunger.

Namo Buddhaya!

May all beings be free from violence and the causes of violence.

-Dzogchen Peace Prayer

## List of Abbreviations

AKB	Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam	Ms	Mahāyānasamgraha
AN	Āṅguttara Nikāya	Mv	Mahāvagga of the Vinayapiṭaka
AP	Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra	Mvs	Mahāvastu
AS	Avataṃsaka Sūtra	PS	Ārya-Śūra's Pāramitāsamāsa
ASN	Ārya-saṃdhinirmocana-nāma-mahāyāna Sūtra	PSS	Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Sūtra
ASP	Ārya-satyaka-parivarta	RR	Nāgārjuna's Rājaparikathā-ratnamālā
BCA	Bodhicaryāvatāra	SN	Samyutta Nikāya
Cv	Cullavagga of the Vinayapiṭaka	Sn	Sutta Nipāta
Dhp	Dhammapada	SNS	Samdhi-nirmocana Sūtra
DN	Dīgha Nikāya	LS	Lotus Sūtra (Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra)
DTK	Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā	Sds	Śrīmālādevisihanāda Sūtra
DS	Diamond Sūtra	SS	Śikṣāsamuccaya
Itv	Itivuttaka	SVV	Sukhāvatīvūha Sūtra
Jat	Jātaka	Ta	Theragāthā
Kv	Kathāvatthu	Ti	Therīgāthā
Mhv	Mahāvamsa	Ud	Udāna
MMK	Mūlamadhyamakakārikā	Uss	Upāsakaśīla Sūtra
MN	Majjhima Nikāya	Vis	Visuddhimagga
MP	Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra	Vn	Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra
Mph	Milindapañha		

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## Introduction

Poverty is a perennial concern of individuals, communities, and governments throughout the world. In our current age of globalization it has come to occupy space as a major ethical concern at an international and global level. No doubt this is due to the startling reality that nearly 3 billion people currently live in poverty.<sup>1</sup> As Thomas Pogge notes, this severe poverty has dire consequences:

799 million human beings are undernourished, 1 billion lack access to safe water, 2.4 billion lack access to basic sanitation, and 876 million adults are illiterate. More than 880 million lack access to basic health services. Approximately 1 billion have no adequate shelter and 2 billion no electricity. “Two out of five children in the developing world are stunted, one in three is underweight, and one in ten is wasted.” Some 250 million children between 5 and 14 do wage work outside their household—often under harsh or cruel conditions: as soldiers, prostitutes, or domestic servants, or in agriculture, construction, textile or carpet production. “Worldwide, 34,000 children under age five die daily from hunger and preventable diseases.” Roughly one third of all human deaths, some 50,000 daily are due to poverty-related causes easily preventable through better nutrition, safe

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<sup>1</sup> Chen and Ravallion, 2008: 20-24; UNDP, 2007: 25. This is the estimated number living on less than \$2.50 a day.

drinking water, vaccines, cheap rehydration packs and antibiotics.<sup>2</sup>

The recent global economic recession further highlights the precarious situation in which many find themselves—so many living day after day in extreme poverty, and many more living on the very brink, just one crisis, drought, or illness away from being added to the masses in extreme poverty. And actually, if poverty levels are more subjectively measured by citizen's own standards, an estimated 81-88% of the world's population live below the poverty level.<sup>3</sup>

Ironically, even while the real numbers of people living in extreme poverty has climbed with the upsurge in the world's population, technological advances and increases in global production has also led to unprecedented rises in global wealth and consumption. Wealth and consumption levels are important to note as they highlight a glaring global income and wealth disparity. Peter Singer notes:

We live in a unique moment. The proportion of people unable to meet their basic physical needs is smaller today than it has been at any time in recent history, and perhaps at any time since humans first came into existence. At the same time, when we take a long-term perspective that sees beyond the fluctuation of the economic cycle, the proportion of

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<sup>2</sup> Pogge, 2000: 253. The United Nations Human Development Report indicates that some 10 Million children die before age 5 each year, mostly due to malnutrition and starvation. See UNDP, 2007: 25.

<sup>3</sup> Pritchett, 2006: 6-15. Here Pritchett considers the views of the poorest in rich countries and the richest in poor countries to determine what they consider the poverty line. In conclusion, he assumes a poverty line of \$10 a day, much higher than UNDP standards.

people with far more than they need is unprecedented. Most important, rich and poor are now linked in ways they never were before. Moving images, in real time, of people on the edge of survival are beamed into our living rooms. Not only do we know a lot about the desperately poor, but we also have much more to offer them in terms of better health care, improved seeds and agricultural techniques, and new technologies for generating electricity.<sup>4</sup>

This gap between the income or amassed wealth of the world's wealthiest and poorest is a helpful way of conceptualizing both the problem of inequality and the possibility of a solution or an end to global extreme poverty. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) explains that if the world were a single country, the average income would be the equivalent of \$5,533, with the median income at \$1,700 in 2000.<sup>5</sup> The report also includes a breakdown of global income by population:

The gap between median and average income points to a concentration of income at the top end of the distribution: 80% of the world's population had an income less than the average. Meanwhile, the average income of the top 20% of the world's population is about 50 times the average income of the bottom 20%. Global income distribution resembles a champagne glass [see figure 1 below]. At the top, where the glass is widest, the richest 20% of the population hold three-quarters of world income. At the bottom of the stem, where the glass is narrowest, the poorest 40% hold 5% of world income and the poorest 20% hold just 1.5%. The poorest 40% roughly corresponds to the 2 billion people

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<sup>4</sup> Singer, 2009, xii.

<sup>5</sup> UNDP, 2005: 36.

living on less than \$2 a day.<sup>6</sup>

### World Income Distributed by Percentiles of the Population, 2000

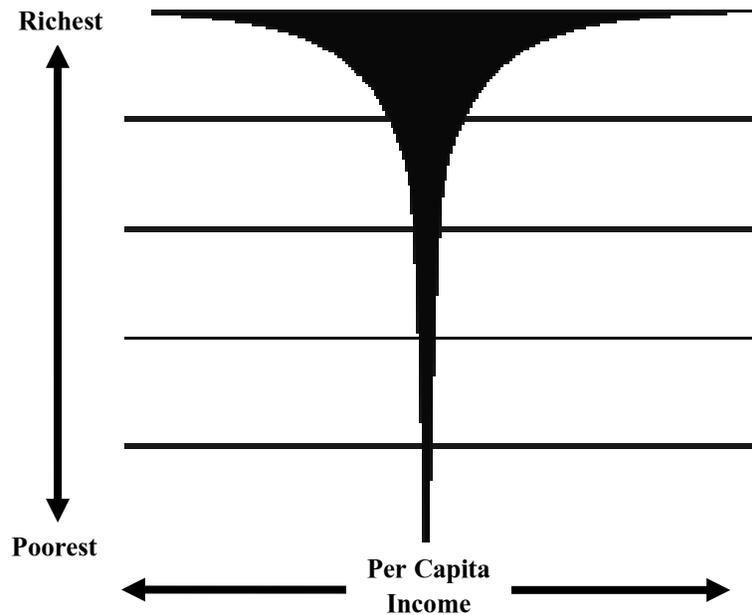


Figure 1: World Income Distributed by Percentiles of the Population, 2000.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps not surprisingly, the global income inequality is also paralleled by a corresponding inequality in the consumption of the world's resources. Along with the improvements in technology and increases in wealth has followed an increase in consumption. It has been estimated that, if everyone in the world were to match the level of consumption of those living in the West, the resources of 10 planet earths would be required.<sup>8</sup> This over-consumption of the world's resources points to another disparity. According to World Bank data, in 2005, 76.5% of

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Maguire, 2012: 441.

the private household consumption of the world's resources was done by the top 20% of the world's income earners, compared to only 1.5% consumption among the bottom 20%.<sup>9</sup> When viewed in terms of global population by quintiles, the levels of consumption mirror very closely the income distribution shown above in figure 1. In both cases we see a structure in which the world's wealthiest 20% both own and consume just over 75% of the world's income and resources, while the bottom 20% by comparison have a share of approximately 1.5%.

Although many developed countries consistently report what are unprecedented levels of wealth in the whole of human history, the effects of severe poverty remain a problem even within their own borders—how much more so the numerous impoverished countries whose citizens daily face widespread starvation and disease with little hope of relief. Perhaps most alarming, while economic growth and prosperity has increased significantly in many countries in recent decades, and despite the targeted poverty alleviation efforts by local and international bodies, both public and private, poverty seems to persist and has even increased in many of the targeted areas.<sup>10</sup>

Although, global poverty is already at a disconcerting level, and global income inequalities continue to raise concerns despite anti-poverty efforts, we should not conclude that poverty is simply an inevitable aspect of human existence or that nothing can be done to effectively alleviate the suffering of the poor, let alone to actually end extreme poverty. We can infer from

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<sup>9</sup> World Bank, 2008: 4.

<sup>10</sup> Odekon, 2006: viii. Poverty rates have dropped significantly over the last 30 years in some regions as national economies expanded, but other regions saw only marginal improvements in poverty reduction, while in the case of countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, poverty actually significantly increased. See, UNDP, 2005: 33-39.

the UNDP data above that there are enough resources, but these resources are not equally available to all of the world's population. Pogge addresses common criticisms of the notion that poverty relief efforts are a moral duty, including this notion of the futility of such efforts, and concludes:

When the income of the top sixth of humankind is seventy times the income of the bottom half, when a third of all human deaths are due to poverty-related causes, and when aggregate global income is continuously rising, it would be ludicrous to claim that reducing poverty is demonstrably impossible. We do not perhaps know offhand what is the best way to proceed. But we are not exactly clueless either and would learn much more in the course of making a serious and concerted effort. Clearly, our deficiency here is not expertise, but a sense of moral responsibility and, based thereon, the political will to fund basic development and to push reforms in our global economic order.

If Pogge is correct—and I think that he is—a primary obstacle to effective poverty relief efforts that must be overcome would seem to involve conceptualizing poverty in a way that engenders that sense of individual and collective moral responsibility, and the corresponding political will, to begin more concerted efforts to reduce, and eventually eliminate, extreme poverty. Beyond the debates about which strategy would theoretically be the most effective, most efficient, or would best fit the prevailing political ideology—foreign aid, microfinance, education, improved sanitation and health care, property rights and increasing democratic governance—the actual work of alleviating global poverty remains. As Pogge notes, many of these issues will sort themselves out as serious and concerted efforts are undertaken. A diversity of approaches will likely be required to match the diverse needs and conditions of different geographic areas, rather

than one ‘silver bullet’ solution. The first great obstacle then is developing the political will and sense of moral responsibility required for decisive action.

It is not only recently that poverty has become an issue of major concern for so many people. To be sure, poverty has always been a concern of individuals and communities throughout history; as Sharon Vaughn puts it, “the number of people who live in poverty has always far exceeded the number who do not. As a result, governments as well as individuals continually grapple with defining who the poor are, why they are poor, and what, if anything should be done to alleviate poverty.”<sup>11</sup> Aside from the existential gravity of these questions for a community and its members’ well-being, they also cut directly to the very sense of identity and the world-view of the community; the manner in which a given community responds to these questions will considerably influence their foundational theories of social ethics, as well as notions of justice, and equality.

In recent decades poverty has become established as a topic of study in various fields within academia as diverse as economics, public administration and policy, international development studies, anthropology and sociology, philosophy and ethics, and political science. Poverty relief has also become a focus of much attention in the political arena, particularly as many world leaders have made commitments to the Millennium Development Goal of halving world poverty by 2015.<sup>12</sup> In addition to the government agencies, non-governmental organizations such as charities and religious groups are also involved in poverty relief efforts in one way or another, from large scale development programs to small grassroots projects. Perhaps religious groups

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<sup>11</sup> Vaughn, 2008: 1.

<sup>12</sup> [www.endpoverty2015.org](http://www.endpoverty2015.org)

have always of necessity been concerned with poverty within their communities, but the concern for distant communities, as in addressing world poverty, is much more common and much more pressing now.

Consequently, there has been an increase in cooperation between religious groups and governmental and nongovernmental international development groups in recent years. Former President of the World Bank, James D. Wolfensohn, notes, “If development is to succeed, development policies must truly be integral in scope. Religion, therefore, cannot be excluded from the debate.”<sup>13</sup> He observes that because religion is a dimension of life that permeates whatever believers do, it affects their opinions on everything, including savings, investment, and a host of economic decisions, including many issues that are particularly essential to development projects, such as health, schooling, and gender equality. Gerrie Ter Haar similarly reports that many development organizations have come to realize that religion can be either an important driver of change or a brake to progress.<sup>14</sup> But, as he notes, some development specialists remain sceptical of the role of religion in development, seeing it as an obstacle to material progress by opposing a rational view of the world and promoting cultural attributes opposed to development.<sup>15</sup> However, others, much like Wolfensohn above, are more open to cooperation, recognizing that theological beliefs can have a significant influence on the way that billions of individuals behave. As Ter Haar puts it:

Given that religion is an integral part of the lives of billions of people, it can be

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<sup>13</sup> Ter Haar, 2011: xviii

<sup>14</sup> Ter Haar, 2011: xvii- xviii.

<sup>15</sup> Ter Haar, 2011: 5.

considered a human resource of significant importance. Since it is widely accepted in policy circles that development, if it is to be effective and lasting, should build on people's own resources, it makes sense to include their religious or spiritual resources and not material and intellectual ones only.<sup>16</sup>

These religious or spiritual resources include what is often called social capital, referring to the support of relationships, access to certain goods or services, and other intangible resources that are available specifically through social activities and participation within a given community, but they also include the teachings that motivate action and form the foundation for moral or ethical views.

As is also the case with other major world religions whose teachings must relate to the actual lived experiences of their adherents, Buddhist teachings address the moral dimensions of poverty and, as this dissertation will demonstrate, these teachings make important contributions to discussions relating to global poverty and the moral obligation to alleviate it. For example, since the late 1960s, a movement among Buddhists to more actively engage with political and social issues like poverty, human rights, and environmental protection has arisen and continually increased in prominence. Despite the recurrent characterizations of Buddhism as asocial or unconcerned with society or social problems, these Engaged Buddhists draw upon their tradition, citing key Buddhist teachings as the foundation for their social and political activism. At approximately the same time that the Engaged Buddhist movement got underway in responding to social and political concerns, scholarship in the area of Buddhist ethics also began.<sup>17</sup> Despite

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<sup>16</sup> Ter Haar, 2011: 8-9.

<sup>17</sup> Keown, 2005: 32-33.

the central role of morality in Buddhist practice, and accompanying lists of acceptable or unacceptable behavior in Buddhist texts, the Buddhist tradition as a whole has remained nearly silent in regard to the type of study of ethics known today in the West, with no clear ethical system or overt ethical principles outlined in Buddhist texts for addressing particular ethical concerns or dilemmas. Over the last few decades, however, scholars have referred to the overabundance of teachings on morality and practical examples given in Buddhist scriptures as the data from which to formulate general guiding ethical principles to apply to particular contemporary problems such as human rights, war and peace, ecology, abortion, suicide or cloning.<sup>18</sup> There remains, however, a significant gap in literature related to the wealth of passages in authoritative scriptural texts that deal with Buddhist concepts of poverty or the social and economic ethics regarding poverty relief in Buddhist economic ethics.

By virtually any measure, little has been written by Buddhists throughout the history of the Buddhist tradition, or by contemporary Buddhist scholars, directly addressing the Buddhist conception of extreme poverty, its causes, effects, and the proper manner that it should be dealt with by individuals, communities, and governments. Over the last few decades, Buddhist activists have begun to directly address these issues, but their writings have often been polemics against contemporary political or economic structures, or apologetics encouraging activism within their community, rather than more academic scholarly treatments of Buddhist texts and doctrines relating to these issues. Perhaps partially as a result of this, over the past twenty years, these writings and the entire Socially Engaged Buddhist movement came under scrutiny.

Numerous scholars questioned whether the movement is continuous with the Buddhist tradition

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<sup>18</sup> The most comprehensive examples of these are Harvey, 2000; and Keown, 2000.

as a whole, or whether they have in fact developed something other than Buddhism, perhaps, for example, through a syncretisation with Western political thought based on the Abrahamic religion's notions of justice.<sup>19</sup> This can be seen as a continuation of a much larger debate that has been a part of Buddhist studies in the West since its inception concerning the nature of Buddhist social ethics—does the Buddhist tradition encourage a concern for engaging with, or improving society, or merely in withdrawing from it and transcending it?

In this dissertation I will broadly address the issues of poverty and poverty relief in Buddhist social and economic ethics from early Buddhism to the contemporary Socially Engaged Buddhist movement. I begin with an outline of the key Buddhist doctrines essential for understanding the Buddhist concepts of poverty and poverty relief, and which serve as the foundational principles for Buddhist analyses of the issues related to these concepts. I will then consider the discussion among scholars concerning Buddhist social ethics. Since Western scholars first began writing on the Buddhist tradition, a main line of inquiry has concerned how Buddhism teaches that monks and lay followers should relate to society, particularly in the political and economic realms. Some have argued that Buddhists are or ought to be virtually unconcerned with material or social issues, only in transcending them, while others argue that teachings concerning what are considered the appropriate social, political, and economic relationships and duties have been present throughout the whole of Buddhist history.

Moving then from addressing Buddhist social ethics, I will outline the major passages in key Buddhist scripture related to economic principles, and proceed to discuss scholarly approaches to

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<sup>19</sup> See Queen, 2001, for a discussion of these concerns.

formulating a Buddhist economic theory. The notion of Buddhist economics includes the general attitudes toward wealth and is largely based on the teaching of Right Livelihood, as contained in the Noble Eightfold Path. I will there address the questions of how Buddhist thought applies in the economic realm, and what specific teachings directly deal with economic matters.

After discussing Buddhist economics, I will address the particular teachings found in Buddhist scriptures concerning notions of poverty, particularly its causes and effects, and duties regarding poverty relief. These scriptural passages will then serve as the foundation for an analysis of Buddhist concepts of poverty and poverty relief as they compare to common modern Western approaches to these concepts. This will be followed by examples of poverty relief efforts which put these teachings into practice from Buddhist history and the contemporary Socially Engaged Buddhist movement.

To state it plainly, the goal of this dissertation is to identify in key Buddhist scriptures and texts the teachings related to poverty and poverty relief in the Buddhist tradition, including general conceptions of poverty, normative principles related to the moral responsibility toward poverty relief, Buddhist economic principles and historical examples of the application of these. These teachings and historical examples provide evidence that some concern for material poverty has been apparent from the earliest accounts of Buddhist history. This entails demonstrating that some negative form of material poverty has been distinguished from the common positive portrayals of voluntary poverty or simplicity in Buddhist teachings, and that this negative form of poverty carries with it a duty to relieve it in some manner. Such teachings amount to at the very least a basic social or economic ethic and point towards a general Buddhist approach to social theory and economics. While I do not intend to defend the ‘orthodoxy’ of any particular

engaged Buddhists or even the movement as a whole, I do aim to demonstrate that the teachings we find in some of the earliest texts would suggest that Buddhist followers and scholars who attempt to apply Buddhist teachings to economic analysis and poverty relief are not necessarily breaking with their tradition in doing so, but may in fact simply exemplify a current of thought that has existed within the tradition for millennia.

Moreover, these teachings can make important contributions to current discussions of poverty and poverty relief, far from merely arcane adages, the notions of poverty presented and the moral responsibility to relieve poverty found in Buddhist scriptures and texts are remarkably relevant to current discussions. And, while these teachings are gleaned from authoritative Buddhist texts, the message they convey is not only for Buddhists. While there is clear value in presenting these notions and principles in a language that will resonate with the many Buddhist followers throughout the world, one need not be Buddhist to recognize the relevance or power of the notions conveyed concerning the human condition and the nature of the phenomenon of poverty.

Because the study of Buddhist ethics as a branch of Buddhist studies is a relatively recent development, it is in a sense treading on new ground to address the ethical principles related to contemporary issues like global poverty. To augment the difficulty, the Buddhist tradition is itself widely diverse with numerous and varying texts and doctrines seen as central and essential by varying schools within Buddhism. Nevertheless, as leading Buddhist Ethics scholars Peter Harvey and Damien Keown note, this diversity need not prevent defining certain general doctrines and principles that are accepted by virtually all Buddhist schools, particularly when

discussing the area of ethics or morality which is a focus of this dissertation.<sup>20</sup> We can speak of Buddhist ethics just as well as of a Buddhist tradition, while recognizing that some Buddhists may have diverging opinions on certain particulars.

Keown has outlined a set of six general governing principles for establishing continuity with the Buddhist tradition or overall Buddhist perspective.<sup>21</sup> First, the view or principle under consideration will derive authority from canonical sources. Second, it will have further support in non-canonical or commentarial literature. Third, it will not be contradicted by the canonical or non-canonical sources. Fourth, there will be evidence that it is in line with the views of a majority of Buddhist schools. Fifth, it has a broad cultural base. And, sixth, it has been a consistently held view over time. Of course, these principles are not rigid or strict essential requirements that must all be met before something can be considered Buddhist, but the greater the number of these criteria that are met, the greater the likelihood that something will be widely accepted among the diverse Buddhist communities and that it can be considered in keeping with what we can call the Buddhist tradition. By relying on Buddhist scriptures and historical examples throughout both time and space in the tradition, I aim to demonstrate that a concern for the relief of material poverty is consistent with the teachings and goals of this Buddhist tradition.

In this dissertation, I rely heavily on the teachings on poverty and poverty relief that are found in the Pāli Canon, although I also rely on various later Mahāyāna sūtras. The Pāli Canon is traditionally divided into three categories, called the *Tipiṭaka* (Sanskrit: *Tripitaka*), meaning the

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<sup>20</sup> Keown, 2005: 3-20; Harvey, 2000: 8-59.

<sup>21</sup> Keown, 2005: 37.

‘Three Baskets’: the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, the *Sutta Piṭaka*, and the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*.<sup>22</sup> These are a collection of the oral tradition of the teachings of the Buddha from his forty five year ministry passed down from the Buddha to his followers, written down in the first century BCE.<sup>23</sup> *Vinaya Piṭaka* texts, the ‘Basket of the Discipline of Renunciates’, is the main source of the rules governing the behavior of the monastic community. The *Sutta Piṭaka*, the ‘Basket of Discourses of the Buddha’, contains the collection of the Buddha’s teachings on a wide variety of topics. The *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*, ‘The Basket of Higher Teachings’, contains systematized and philosophical renditions of the Buddha’s teachings. Comprising the oldest and most complete of the surviving early canons in the Buddhist tradition, these Pāli texts are widely considered the most authoritative historical sources of the teachings and practices of the living Buddha and his early followers, and the ultimate authority on the Buddha’s teachings for the Theravāda school.

While the Pāli Canon is an important source of the Buddha’s teachings and present an important perspective on early Buddhism, or what can be called Classical Buddhism, not all schools of Buddhism equally consider the Pāli Canon to be the ultimate authority on the Buddha’s teachings. Hsiao-Lan Hu Notes:

Theravādins generally consider the Pāli Canon to be the authentic teachings of the Buddha and remain suspicious of many of the texts preserved in the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna collections. Mahāyānists and Vajrayānists, on the other hand, generally do not question the legitimacy of the Pāli Canon, even though they may consider their respective tradition to be the ultimate form of Buddhism and may consider the Pāli Canon a product

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<sup>22</sup> Hu, 2011: 8-17.

<sup>23</sup> Harvey, 2013: 3-4.

of the Buddha’s “skillful means” that caters to people of lesser capacities. That is, Buddhists across traditions recognize early Buddhist literature as the basic and foundational texts of Buddhism, and more often than not they “see themselves as directly in the line of that early Buddhism.”<sup>24</sup>

And so, in order to provide a more rich and robust perspective on Buddhist views, in addition to the Pāli canonical sources, I augment the following analysis of poverty with references to Mahāyāna sūtras which, although generally of a later date than many of the Pāli texts, are considered to be more authoritative scriptures by Buddhists outside of the Theravāda tradition. However, the vast number of Mahāyāna sūtras, many of which have yet to be translated into the English language, complicates any comprehensive treatment of the Mahāyāna scriptures. Furthermore, unlike the Pāli Canon, which contains relatively few explicit teachings on material poverty as deprivation and poverty relief, the Mahāyāna sūtras frequently refer to poverty in this sense, the suffering it causes, and the duty of the *bodhisattva* to relieve or alleviate that suffering. I therefore must focus my discussion on major Mahāyāna sūtras which convey teachings that are typical or common to Mahāyāna views. I also refer to semi-canonical sources such as the Jātaka tales, which contain tales of the Buddha’s previous lives, and histories which although perhaps not widely considered scripture are nonetheless revered, and establish that certain views and practices were commonly held at early periods. Because there is relatively little variance in the various *vinayas*, or monastic codes, throughout the Buddhist tradition, and these have remained extremely influential in governing the practices and behavior of the monks and nuns, references to poverty relief in the *vinaya* sources may offer evidence of particular views and practices

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<sup>24</sup> Hu, 2011: 8.

broadly throughout time and geography across the various Buddhist schools. By identifying these teachings in Theravāda and Mahāyāna teachings, I intend to outline Buddhist perspectives on issues of poverty and poverty relief in the hope that this will aid not only in establishing Buddhist perspectives on the issues, as well as contemporary and historical practices, but also in generating more clear and insightful analyses and critiques of contemporary solutions to global poverty outside of the Buddhist tradition.

As a brief note on terminology and diacritics, I have chosen to use the Pāli form when introducing key terms throughout this dissertation with the Sanskrit form in parentheses when they seem helpful. When dealing specifically with Mahāyāna doctrines and texts I use the Sanskrit forms and place the Pāli form in parenthesis. I hope this avoids confusion in reading passages that often refer to the same doctrine or concept, but use different forms depending on the original language of the text. When using terms that have become common in English, I have removed the diacritics and italics for ease in reading and use the form that is most widely recognized in English. Thus, for example, I write nirvana instead of *nirvāṇa* or *nibbāna*, and karma instead of *kamma* or *karma*.

## Part I. Doctrinal Foundations of Buddhist Social & Economic Ethics

Early studies of Buddhism in the West, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, typically envisioned a philosophy focused on individual liberation from this world through exercises in mental cultivation, as exemplified in the writings of the father of the sociology of religion, Max Weber.<sup>25</sup> Weber's perspective on Buddhism shaped Buddhist studies in the West to a high degree for generations and remains influential today in discussions of Buddhist social ethics.<sup>26</sup> Consequentially, many Westerners have often assumed that the Buddhist tradition is wholly unconcerned with temporal or material affairs, let alone with relieving or eliminating poverty. However, there are in fact strong principles leading to a Buddhist social ethic evident in Buddhist teachings, and despite the relative scarcity of overt references to destitution or to poverty relief efforts, the concept of material poverty is in fact also well developed in Buddhist canonical texts, demonstrating a high level of concern for the conditions of the poor.

Upon examination of references to poverty and wealth in various Buddhist scriptures, ranging from the early Pāli canonical materials through numerous later Mahāyāna texts, certain common principles emerge which indicate typical Buddhist perceptions of poverty and wealth, and which can be drawn upon to form a foundation for Buddhist social and economic ethics concerning poverty and poverty relief. A clear understanding of the concepts of poverty and poverty relief in the Buddhist tradition, however, first requires an understanding of certain key doctrines that not

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<sup>25</sup> As in Weber, 1956.

<sup>26</sup> Bond, 1988: 23.

only shape the Buddhist worldview, but also serve as the essential toolset for Buddhist analyses of these concepts. Part I of this dissertation will provide a basic doctrinal background necessary for approaching poverty and poverty relief in Buddhist social and economic ethics by outlining the major teachings of the Buddhist tradition. Details of the specific teachings on poverty and poverty relief found in particular Pāli Canonical passages and various Mahāyāna texts will then follow to conclude this section.

## 1. Doctrinal Context for Buddhist Concepts of Poverty & Poverty Relief

One critical point to be made at the outset concerning Buddhist doctrines is that Buddhism has never been a homogenous movement or a unified phenomenon.<sup>27</sup> While, of course, there must be some unifying aspects that make it possible to identify a Buddhist tradition, and there must be at least some basic characteristic similarities among the various schools for them even to make up what can be called a tradition, there is also a notable diversity.<sup>28</sup> Great diversity is often noted in both teachings and practices among the various schools of Buddhism, but diversity within particular schools is evident as well and should also be recognized. According to Bailey and Mabbett, since its earliest history, Buddhism “has always meant different things to different people”, and in light of the various ways that Buddhist monks, lay followers, and rulers interact with each other—as well as with the non-Buddhists in their society—as they practice their religion, it should be seen as “a dynamic process dependent upon, and perhaps shaping, the societies within which it develops.”<sup>29</sup> As such, they contend that it should be conceded that there are several different Buddhisms operative within any one Buddhist culture.<sup>30</sup> And, if a dialogic community with diverse concerns and approaches to teachings and practice was already evident in early Buddhism as it arose within Indian culture, how much more diverse have its teachings

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<sup>27</sup> This has become the common academic perspective, as in Faure, 2009: 1-11; Schmidt-Leukel, 2006b: 2; Williams, 2009: 1; Gombrich, 2006a: 6; Bailey, 2003: 4-10, 257-258.

<sup>28</sup> As I have noted above, Keown outlines several useful criteria for establishing a general continuity with the tradition. See Keown, 2005: 37.

<sup>29</sup> Bailey, 2003: 4, 8-9.

<sup>30</sup> Bailey, 2003: 257-258.

and practices become as it spread into other regions and confronted other cultures throughout the world.

Disagreements over what the Buddha actually taught, what his teachings meant, and how they are to be applied in practice have not only distinguished the various schools within Buddhism from one another in modern times, but such disagreements seem to have existed from even the earliest times in Buddhist history. The Buddhist teachings first developed in northern India near the fifth century BCE, but gradually spread throughout the rest of India.<sup>31</sup> As the Buddhist teachings spread to new areas, the number of schools or groups, known as *nikāyas*, within Buddhism also increased.<sup>32</sup> Although in this early period the distinctions between *nikāyas* seem to have centered on the rules for monks within the *saṅgha*, the monastic community, the schools within the Buddhist tradition have since become differentiated by doctrinal positions as well. Theravāda Buddhism, the ‘Way of the Elders’, survives today as a modernized version of one of the only remaining early *nikāyas*, generally referred to as Śravakayāna. Largely based on then extra-canonical texts, Mahāyāna Buddhism began spreading as a spiritual movement within various *nikāyas* as early as the first century BCE.<sup>33</sup> Over the following few centuries, it came to be seen as a separate group, or groups, within Buddhism, with its adherents claiming to have the

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<sup>31</sup> Exact dates for the Buddha’s life are in dispute, although there is wide agreement that it was sometime between the sixth and fifth centuries BCE. See Prebish, 2008.

<sup>32</sup> Faure, 2009: 5-11.

<sup>33</sup> Williams, 2009:1-7. Williams notes that the Mahāyāna does not seem to have emerged as a rival sect, but gradually developed over centuries as an alternative vocation among Māhayāna and non-Māhayāna monks who lived together in the same monasteries and shared monastic rules (*vinaya*).

true teachings of the Buddha and the superior path to enlightenment. However, it is also important to recognize the diversity within Mahāyāna Buddhism; it has been suggested that the term Mahāyānas be used in order to accentuate the diversity that exists in the various texts and practices that have become popular among Mahāyānist groups from their earliest history.<sup>34</sup> As distinct Mahāyāna schools emerged and fully developed, such as Vajrāyāna or Tibetan, Zen or Chan, and Pure Land Buddhism, this diversity only became more pronounced and established.

The diversity of beliefs and practices continued to increase after the Buddha's death as Buddhism eventually spread widely throughout Central, South and Southeast, and East Asia and all but vanished from India. More recently Buddhism has spread throughout the US, Europe, and is now found in virtually every region of the world. With the introduction of Buddhism into each of these new regions, Buddhism transformed local beliefs and customs and was also transformed by them to varying degrees. Vajrāyāna or Tibetan Buddhism, for example, developed in part as a mixture of Tantrism and scholasticism as Buddhism encountered the local Bon religion in Tibet; and, as Buddhism encountered Daoism and Confucianism in China in approximately the sixth century CE, Chan or Zen Buddhism developed which then took its current form much later in medieval Japan.<sup>35</sup> Even the Theravāda tradition, which remains the only school traceable to early Buddhist origins, has undergone notable transformations into the modernized version existing today. Thus, the temptation may arise to pinpoint what should be considered the orthodox or traditional Buddhist view, but considering the diversity of beliefs and practices throughout the history of the tradition, the final word on the matter would be determined to a large extent by

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<sup>34</sup> Williams, 2009: 3.

<sup>35</sup> Faure, 2009: 2; Loy, 2003: 16.

who you ask. Western scholarship on Buddhism initially tended towards defining the Buddhist tradition in terms of early Buddhism within India and the Theravāda tradition in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, often to the neglect of the significant transformations that occurred within the tradition as Buddhism left India and spread to other regions.<sup>36</sup> It is important to recognize the diversity within the history of the Buddhist tradition broadly when outlining the basic Buddhist teachings that come to bear on social ethics, but this will become an essential point in later chapters, particularly when discussing the continuity of the contemporary Socially Engaged Buddhist movement with the Buddhist tradition.

Notwithstanding the noted diversity in Buddhist thought, there are some foundational teachings that are widely accepted by virtually all schools of Buddhism to some degree, although disagreements may remain concerning the emphasis or priority placed on some of them. These teachings seem to be some of the first taught by the Buddha after his awakening, and have remained at the core of the Buddhist message during the course of its various transformations throughout time and place. Some of these most basic Buddhist doctrines are closely related to issues of poverty and economy and will be discussed here, such as karma (Pāli: *kamma*), suffering, liberation, interdependence, generosity, and compassion. The doctrines of rebirth and karma establish the most basic framework for the Buddhist worldview, making it essential for an understanding of the Buddhist perspective on poverty and particularly the causes of poverty. The Four Noble Truths, which the Buddha taught in his first discourse after his enlightenment, and the teaching on interdependent co-arising deal further with many of the other essential concepts and therefore offer a helpful approach to outlining these key teachings.

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<sup>36</sup> Faure, 2009: 18-23.

## 1.1. The Nature of Existence: *Samsāra*

### 1.1.1. Three Marks of Existence

*Samsāra*, meaning ‘wandering’, refers to the beginningless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth which characterizes worldly existence. Accepted by virtually all dominant Indian religions at the time, this notion of a cycle of rebirths had already become a widely accepted Indian worldview by the time of the Buddha. In Buddhist thought, *samsāra* is characterized by three fundamental qualities: *dukkha* (Sanskrit: *duḥkha*), meaning suffering or dissatisfaction; *anicca* (Sanskrit: *anitya*), meaning impermanence; and, *anattā* (Sanskrit: *anātman*), meaning non-self or the absence of independent or unchanging selfhood.<sup>37</sup> Together these three marks or qualities characterize the realm of *samsāra* to which all sentient beings are bound.

*Dukkha* refers to all types of suffering experienced in life: “birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering; union with what is displeasing is suffering; separation from what is pleasing is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering....”<sup>38</sup> However, in addition to the pain and grief typically associated with suffering, *dukkha* equally refers to experiences typically considered delightful or pleasurable.<sup>39</sup> Because even the most pleasurable emotions and experiences are by nature shallow, fleeting and impermanent, they too inevitably result in dissatisfaction. Thus, *dukkha* refers to all forms of suffering, anxiety, uneasiness or dissatisfaction.

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<sup>37</sup> Skilton, 1997: 27-31.

<sup>38</sup> SN 56:11 (Bodhi, 2000: 1844).

<sup>39</sup> SN 22:22 (Bodhi, 2000: 872); AN 6:23, 63 (Hare, 1934: 221-222, 291-292).

*Anicca* refers to the impermanent or transitory nature of everything in the universe. In Buddhist thought, the world is in a constant state of change in which energies, physical matter, mental states, and consciousness flow, bringing some things into existence as others pass out of existence. Although this teaching is often viewed in the negative light of the dissatisfaction that results from this impermanence, it nonetheless also contains a certain positive element. As Harvey notes, a clear impact of this teaching on ethics is that it allows for improvement within any being, preventing the perspective that anyone is hopelessly stuck in any negative situation, or simply *is* a bad person, a thief, or one might add given our topic, a poor person.<sup>40</sup> This is closely related to the next mark of *samsāric* existence, *anattā*, which refers to the absence of selfhood or an unchanging and independent essence.

The simple meaning of the *anattā* teaching is that there is nothing in living beings, or more generally in the world, that never changes.<sup>41</sup> This distinctively Buddhist teaching contrasts sharply with the two dominant religious groups in India at the time the Buddha; the brahmins taught that the individual self (Sanskrit: *ātman*) was in essence one with the universal and eternal self (Sanskrit: *brahman*), and the Jains taught that the individual self or life (Sanskrit: *jīva*) continued on through cycles of rebirth until it was finally freed from the cycle.<sup>42</sup> According to the Buddha, however, there is no independent, permanent, or unchanging self or soul within any individual and likewise no other fixed or static entities or phenomena within the realm of *samsāra* that are not subject to the process of change, or *anicca*. Rather, that which is often

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<sup>40</sup> Harvey, 2000: 34.

<sup>41</sup> Gombrich, 2009: 8-11.

<sup>42</sup> Gombrich, 2009: 60-74.

mistaken for a permanent self is merely a flow or vortex of changing conditioned states, including such things as thoughts, feelings, consciousness, a material physical body and will.<sup>43</sup> This teaching also has a significant implication on ethics, and in fact can serve as a support for ethical behavior. Harvey notes, that the non-self teaching “undermines the attachment to self—that ‘I ’am a positive, self-identical entity that should be gratified, and should be able to brush aside others if they get in ‘my’ way – which is the basis of lack of respect for others. It undercuts selfishness by undercutting the very notion of a substantial self.”<sup>44</sup> Self-interest, in the sense of a selfish or self-interested concern for one’s own good before other’s is in direct opposition to the non-self teaching, and ought to be dissolved to include the broader interest of all beings as they are all by nature inter-related and inter-dependent. Likewise, suffering also ought to be viewed on a universal or collective level instead of solely on an individual one. Thus, *anicca* teaches that everything is subject to change, and *anattā* teaches that there are in fact no static or independent entities going through that change process, but rather only conditioned phenomena arising in and out of existence.

These three marks of existence together characterize the realm of *samsāra* to which all sentient beings are bound in a continuous cycle of death and rebirth until final liberation is reached in what is in many ways its polar opposite, nirvana (Pāli: *nibbāna*). Though it is said to be impossible to fully conceptualize, nirvana is said to be ultimately blissful, unchanging, and not-

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<sup>43</sup> These are the five aggregates or *khandhas*; *rūpa* (‘form’ or ‘matter’), *vedanā* (‘sensation’ or ‘feeling’), *saññā* (‘perception’ or ‘cognition’), the *saṅkhāras* (‘mental formations’ or ‘volitions’), and *viññāṇa* (‘consciousness’ or ‘discernment’); See SN 22:1-55 (Bodhi, 2000: 853-94) and MN 109 (Ñāṇamoli, 1995: 887-891).

<sup>44</sup> Harvey, 2000: 36.

conditioned.<sup>45</sup> Nirvana is most frequently described metaphorically as an extinguishing or cooling of the fires of craving, greed, hatred, and delusion- the very conditions leading to suffering and rebirth.<sup>46</sup> Attaining this release from the realm of *samsāra* and entering nirvana is the ultimate goal in the Buddhist tradition.

## 1.2. Karma and Rebirth

### 1.2.1. Karma as Cosmic Justice

The doctrine of karma is of supreme importance within the Buddhist tradition, acting as a sort of universal law of justice by linking moral conduct to the varied states of all past, present, and future births. This connecting link between moral conduct and the various blissful or unpleasant states provides a clear motivation for Buddhist followers to behave ethically. Similar to both the *Brāhmaṇical* and Jain traditions, the Buddha identified karma, meaning ‘action’, as the principle or law of justice that ensures that actions always produce corresponding beneficial or detrimental results for the doer. However, whereas the brahmins generally took karma to refer to ritual actions or performances, the Jains and Buddhists ethicized karma by applying the term specifically to moral or ethical actions instead of ritual.<sup>47</sup> The Buddha did so even more fully than the Jains by declaring karma to be intention or volition rather than strictly outward action<sup>48</sup>:

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<sup>45</sup> MN 75 (Ñāṇamoli, 1995: 607-617); Ud 8:3 (Ireland, 1997: 103).

<sup>46</sup> Schmidt-Leukel 2006b: 48-49; See, for example, MN 72 (Ñāṇamoli, 1995: 591-594).

<sup>47</sup> Gombrich, 2009: 48-51.

<sup>48</sup> Gombrich, 2009: 49-51; and, Johnson, 1995. Gombrich refers to Johnson as support in maintaining that the earliest Jain doctrine of karma holds that it results from moral

Monks, I say that determinate thought is action [karma]. When one determines, one acts by deed, word or thought... There is action that is experience in hell, in a beast's womb... in the deva-world.... It may either arise here now or at another time or on the way ....<sup>49</sup>

In addition to this distinctive claim that karma is intention (determinate thought), this passage further asserts that good or bad karmic results manifest at various times. Thus, not all of the good or bad karmic results of any particular act may be evident immediately, but the law of karma guarantees that they will become manifest in some form in the present or some future life. Indeed, much karma only ripens and manifests after this life, thereupon determining the realm of existence into which one is reborn.

### 1.2.2. *Paṭicca-Samuppāda*

One of the key Buddhist teachings is referred to as conditioned origination, dependent arising, or interdependent co-arising (Pāli: *paṭicca-samuppāda*; Sanskrit: *pratītya-samutpāda*). Hu argues that it is the central teaching of the Buddha that strings all of his teachings together, stating “interdependent co-arising is the core, the summary, and the logic of the Buddhist *Dhamma*.”<sup>50</sup> By way of comparison to the centrality of the better-known Four Noble Truths, she adds, “The Four Noble Truths are undeniably central in the Buddhist *Dhamma*, but the reasoning behind the

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action (with a clear focus on the act), but does not allow for good karma as did the Buddha. To attain a better rebirth then, one would simply try to eliminate bad karma.

<sup>49</sup> AN 6: 63 (Hare, 1934: 294).

<sup>50</sup> Hu, 2011: 19.

Four Noble Truths, behind the arising and cessation of *dukkha*, is interdependent co-arising.”<sup>51</sup>

As Hu notes, some of the Buddha’s closest and wisest early disciples, Sāriputta and Ānanda, acknowledge that the one seemingly simple teaching on interdependent co-arising contained the heart of all of the Buddha’s teachings.<sup>52</sup>

According to the *paṭicca-samuppāda* teaching, suffering and rebirth arise from the preceding conditions of craving, attachment, and ignorance.<sup>53</sup> Speaking more generally, interdependent co-arising refers to the principle that all phenomena in the natural world, or in *saṃsāra*, arise as a result of a host of other necessary conditions; as we find it in the *Majjhima Nikāya*: “when this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases.”<sup>54</sup> Phenomena arise as a result of complex conditions and processes that all interact and are interdependent, rather than independent substantial permanently-existing entities, and rather than resulting from a direct linear notion of causation.

A late and often cited description in the Buddhist tradition of the complexity of these conditions of interdependence is the example of Indra’s Net found in the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*.<sup>55</sup> The interdependence of natural phenomena is compared to a web of jewels, in which the jewels at each intersection reflect all other jewels; when closely examined, each jewel reflects all of the

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<sup>51</sup> Hu, 2011: 20.

<sup>52</sup> Hu, 2011: 19; See MN 28: 28 (Ñāṇamoli, 1995: 283) and SN 12: 24 (Bodhi, 2000: 558-559) respectively.

<sup>53</sup> Schmidt-Leukel, 2006b: 46-48; Ud 1: 1-4 (Ireland, 1997: 13-16).

<sup>54</sup> MN 115: 11 (Ñāṇamoli, 1995: 927); See also, SN 12: 17 (Bodhi, 2000: 547-548).

<sup>55</sup> AS 30 (Cleary, 1993: 889-905).

other jewels—an infinite number of jewels reflected within each and every jewel. In a similar and incalculable way, phenomena in the world of *samsāra* form a complex web of causation and interdependence. Commenting on this metaphor and how it is used in the Huayan (Huayen) tradition, David Loy states, “In this cosmos each phenomenon is at the same time the effect of the whole and the cause of the whole, the totality being a vast, infinite body of members, each sustaining and defining all the others.”<sup>56</sup> Hu similarly notes, “As Indra’s Net stretches infinitely in all directions, so is the scope of the repercussions of any action. And as the shape and color of one jewel at one node of Indra’s Net are reflected by all other jewels on the Net, and then will be reflected back and seen in its reflections of other jewels, so are a person’s thinking, feeling, and behavioral patterns reflected in others’ patterns and further reflected back on oneself.”<sup>57</sup>

In a more particular sense, the chain of conditioned arising identifies those conditions that lead specifically to the arising of suffering and rebirth. Ignorance or delusion is the first condition in this chain, leading through eleven other conditions, some of which may occur simultaneously: volitional activities, consciousness, name and form, the sixfold sense bases, contact, feeling, craving, grasping or clinging, being or existence, birth, and finally ageing and death accompanied by the “whole mass of suffering.”<sup>58</sup> When the conditions that lead to suffering are removed, the arising of suffering is also prevented.

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<sup>56</sup> Loy, 2003a: 183.

<sup>57</sup> Hu, 2011: 92.

<sup>58</sup> Ud 1: 1-2 (Ireland, 1997: 13-16); SN 12: 2 (Bodhi, 2000: 534).

In Buddhist thought, karma has a prevailing psychological meaning, focusing first and foremost on the intention or volition that motivates one to act.<sup>59</sup> Intention or volition is seen as the immediate impulse behind an action; actions in time shape one's consciousness and, thus, one's very nature; this ultimately determines the state of one's rebirth. 'Unskillful' intentions and deeds—those rooted in the three unskillful *mūlas* of greed, hatred, and delusion—generate negative karmic results and inevitably lead toward rebirth in a lower realm such as an animal realm or a hell.<sup>60</sup> 'Skillful' volition and actions—those that have root in the three skillful *mūlas*, namely non-greed or generosity, non-hatred or loving-kindness, and non-delusion or wisdom—generate positive karmic results, which lead to rebirth once again as a human or into a higher realm as a divine being, and ultimately lead one closer to a final release from the cycle of rebirths.<sup>61</sup>

The most common way to generate positive karmic results, what is often called 'making merit', is through the practice of *dāna*. *Dāna* is the central Buddhist virtue of giving or generosity and is seen as the most basic act to weaken and counteract the three unskillful *mūlas*, particularly greed, and to secure a desirable rebirth and eventual release from *saṃsāra*. Consequently, an immediate goal for Buddhist practitioners is to generate the positive *karmic* results that will ensure a pleasant rebirth in one of the higher realms, although the ultimate goal is to cease generating karma entirely in the attainment of the release from the cycle of rebirths.

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<sup>59</sup> Schmidt-Leukel, 2006b: 45.

<sup>60</sup> AN 10: 210-219 (Woodward, 1936: 197-200); AN 6: 39 (Hare, 1934: 239). Lance Cousins argues that 'skillful/unskillful', rather than 'good/bad', are the appropriate terms in Cousins, 1996: 143-148.

<sup>61</sup> AN 10: 210-219 (Woodward, 1936: 197-200); AN 6: 39 (Hare, 1934: 239).

### 1.3. The Four Noble Truths: Suffering and Liberation

The Buddha summarized the whole of his teachings with the assertion: "formerly ... and also now, I make known just suffering and the cessation of suffering."<sup>62</sup> Providing the basic framework for Buddhist teachings on suffering and liberation, The Four Noble Truths are often cited as the Buddha's most central teachings in early Buddhism and the Theravāda tradition, and, more broadly, serve as a foundation for the later Mahāyāna tradition as well.<sup>63</sup> The Four Noble Truths assert that: (1) the experience of life is *dukkha* (Sanskrit: *duḥkha*), which refers to dissatisfaction or suffering; (2) *dukkha* is caused by craving (Pāli: *taṇhā*, Sanskrit: *trṣṇā*) or grasping (*upādāna*); however, (3) it can be transcended by removing this craving or thirst; and, (4) the Noble Eightfold Path constitutes the path leading to transcendence or nirvana.<sup>64</sup> These teachings of the Buddha place suffering, in its multiplicity of forms, and liberation from all forms of suffering at the center of the Buddha's message; these teachings on suffering and liberation are likewise central to an understanding of the Buddhist conceptions of poverty and poverty relief.

#### 1.3.1. Suffering

The first Noble Truth declares:

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<sup>62</sup> SN 22: 86 (Bodhi, 2000: 938); also, MN 22: 38 (Ñāṇamoli, 1995: 234);

<sup>63</sup> Harvey, 2000: 47-72.

<sup>64</sup> See SN 56: 11 (Bodhi, 2000: 1844-1845).

Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of suffering: birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering; union with what is displeasing is suffering; separation from what is pleasing is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering; in brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering.<sup>65</sup>

The term *dukkha* refers to all types of suffering and dissatisfaction experienced in life. However, in addition to the pain and grief that is typically associated with suffering, *dukkha* also refers to experiences that are typically considered desirable, delightful, or pleasurable.<sup>66</sup>

*Dukkha* can be divided into three types or categories: *dukkha-dukkhatā*, *vipariṇāma-dukkhatā*, and *saṅkhāra-dukkhatā*.<sup>67</sup> *Dukkha-dukkhatā* includes the physical and mental pain or discomfort that is generally associated with the term suffering. *Vipariṇāma-dukkhatā* is suffering that arises from impermanence, and includes the fear of death and other fears and dissatisfactions that are associated with the fleeting or impermanent nature of our existence and experience. *Saṅkhāra-dukkhatā* refers to suffering caused by conditioned states that cause the ongoing flow of rebirth. This type of *dukkha* generally refers to all forms of anxiety or other dissatisfaction related to the ego or misguided notions of the self; this results from attachment to one of the five *khandhas* (Sanskrit: *skandha*) or aggregates that are the focus of grasping and wrongly taken to be a permanent, autonomous self. The five *khandhas* or aggregates include form or matter (*rūpa*); sensation or feeling (*vedanā*); perception or cognition (Sanskrit: *saṃjñā*, Pāli: *saññā*); mental formations or volitions (Sanskrit: *saṃskāra*, Pāli: *saṅkhāra*); and, consciousness (Sanskrit:

<sup>65</sup> SN 56: 11 (Bodhi, 2000: 1844).

<sup>66</sup> See SN 22: 22 (Bodhi, 2000: 872); AN 6: 23, 63 (Hare, 1934: 221-222, 291).

<sup>67</sup> Loy, 2003: 19-22; See also SN 38: 14 (Bodhi, 2000: 1299).

*vijñāna*, Pāli: *viññāṇa*).<sup>68</sup> Thus, the Buddhist term *dukkha* reflects a broad and systemic problem that permeates all aspects of life.

### 1.3.2. The Origin of Suffering

The second Noble Truth declares:

Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the origin of suffering: It is this craving which leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there; that is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence, craving for extermination.<sup>69</sup>

Here the Buddha identifies *taṇhā* (Sanskrit: *trṣṇā*), meaning craving or thirst, as the cause of *dukkha* and the reason for continual rebirth in *saṃsāra*. According to the *paṭicca-samuppāda* teaching, craving is a preceding condition for *upādāna*, meaning attachment or clinging- the direct opposite of *dāna*, meaning generosity or giving. Attachment manifests itself in the three unskillful *mūlas*- greed, hatred, or delusion- and is evident in strong or subtle forms.<sup>70</sup> Once a person has destroyed the unskillful *mūlas* and is free of them, a person has thereby become an Arahant and is free of the cycle of rebirths. Both *taṇhā* and *upādāna* are conditioned by and result from the first condition in the chain of interdependent co-arising, spiritual ignorance- erroneously believing that things of this *saṃsāric* world can bring ultimate or lasting satisfaction.

<sup>68</sup> See SN 22: 55 (Bodhi, 2000: 892-893);

<sup>69</sup> SN 56: 11 (Bodhi, 2000: 1844).

<sup>70</sup> Schmidt-Leukel, 2006b: 45; Also, see AN 3: 33 (Woodward, 1932: 117-119 ); AN 6: 39 (Hare, 1934: 239).

Because everything is subject to *anicca* and *anattā*, any clinging or attachment is inevitably vain and demonstrates ignorance to the true nature of reality which must be overcome in order to attain enlightenment.

However, not all forms of desire are discouraged. Schmidt-Leukel points out the distinction between the “noble” and the “ignoble search” in Buddhist teachings to demonstrate that *taṇhā* does not refer to all forms of human desire.<sup>71</sup> The *Majjhima Nikāya* explicitly makes the distinction:

And what is the ignoble search? Here someone being himself subject to birth seeks what is also subject to birth; being himself subject to ageing, he seeks what is also subject to ageing; being himself subject to sickness, he seeks what is also subject to sickness; being himself subject to death, he seeks what is also subject to death; being himself subject to sorrow, he seeks what is also subject to sorrow; being himself subject to defilement, seeks what is also subject to defilement.

[...]

And what is the noble search? Here someone being subject to birth, having understood the danger in what is subject to birth, seeks unborn supreme security from bondage, Nibbāna; being himself subject to ageing, having understood the danger in what is subject to ageing, he seeks the unageing supreme security from bondage, Nibbāna;....[and so on...]. This is the noble search.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Schmidt-Leukel, 2006b: 33-34.

<sup>72</sup> MN 26: 1-15 (Ñāṇamoli, 1995: 253-257).

Thus, any “right effort” or desire directed toward what is noble, such as the pursuit of nirvana, is free from the criticism directed at craving of that which is “ignoble.” However, eventually even the striving or desire for nirvana must necessarily vanish, as the ultimate goal is finally reached, thus bringing an end to all striving and attachment, in a final state of absolute peace and satisfaction.<sup>73</sup> All thirst or craving is overcome by the insights that attachment is vain because “nothing is fit to be clung to” since it cannot bring any lasting satisfaction, and that there is an ultimate bliss and satisfaction or happiness to be found in nirvana that transcends anything found in the *samsāric* realm.<sup>74</sup> While, for many followers, producing skillful or meritorious karma to affect a good rebirth is the immediate goal, ultimately it is held that all should strive for the final liberation that comes once all thoughts, intentions, and deeds are free from greed, hatred, and ignorance, and no further karma is produced.<sup>75</sup>

### 1.3.3. The Cessation of Suffering

The third Noble Truth asserts the possibility that suffering can be overcome:

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<sup>73</sup> SN 51: 15 (Bodhi, 2000: 1732-1733).

<sup>74</sup> AN 7: 58, 75: 10-22 (Ñāṇamoli, 1995: 610-614). For further positive descriptions and images of the ultimate bliss of nirvana found in the Pāli Canon, see Collins, 2010: 61-99.

<sup>75</sup> AN 6: 39 (Hare, 2001a: 239), AN 3:33 (Woodward, 1932: 117-119); AN 10: 173-174 (Woodward, 1936: 174-175); Schmidt-Leukel, 2006b: 45.

Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering: It is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, nonreliance on it.<sup>76</sup>

The Four Noble Truths evince the focus on overcoming *dukkha* as the central concern and preoccupation of the Buddha's teachings. Often juxtaposed with *dukkha* is *sukha*, meaning happiness, well-being, or bliss. *Sukha* refers to a range of happiness, from sensual pleasures to the more rarefied bliss associated with meditative absorption.<sup>77</sup> Thus, the Buddhist goal is not merely a negative one, in removing suffering, but includes a positive aspect of attaining blissful states. What is more, the Buddha taught that *sukha* is one of the key and final criteria for determining the truthfulness of his teachings; if well-being and happiness are produced when the teachings are put into practice, then they should be accepted and followed.<sup>78</sup>

In accordance with the previously mentioned chain of interdependent co-arising, the liberation from *samsāra* occurs with the cessation of the preceding conditions that lead to rebirth. Nirvana refers to the complete liberation from rebirth and suffering, as well as their causes—ignorance, craving, and attachment—which the Buddha attained upon his enlightenment. Although nirvana is a term that has become widely recognized in the West in recent decades, its meaning remains unclear to many. Because nirvana is in every way other than what we conceive in this state of

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<sup>76</sup> SN 56: 11 (Bodhi, 2000: 1844).

<sup>77</sup> For example, AN 4: 62 (Nyanaponika, 1999: 99-100) refers to the happiness of accumulating wealth, while AN 5: 28 (Hare, 1934: 17-21) refers to *sukha* as one of the five factors of concentrative absorption. See also Puntasen, 2008: 41-43.

<sup>78</sup> AN 3: 65 (Woodward, 1932: 170-175).

*samsāra*, it eludes any extensive conception by unenlightened beings and represents the ultimate reality that can only be known by one who attains it. For this reason, nirvana is often described in only negative terms; the Buddha described his enlightenment:

When I knew and saw thus, my mind was liberated from the taint of sensual desire, from the taint of being, and from the taint of ignorance. When it was liberated there came the knowledge: ‘It is liberated.’ I directly knew: ‘Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming to any state of being.’<sup>79</sup>

#### 1.3.4. The Noble Eightfold Path

The fourth Noble Truth outlines basic elements of a path that leads to liberation from all types of *dukkha* and the realm of *samsāra*: the *ariya atṭhaṅgika magga*, meaning the Noble Eightfold Path, the Ennobling Eightfold Path, or the Eightfold Path of the Noble Ones.

Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering: It is this Noble Eightfold Path; that is right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.<sup>80</sup>

The Noble Eightfold Path is composed of eight factors that are frequently divided into three broad divisions: *sīla* (morality), consisting of Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood; *samādhi* (meditation or concentration), consisting of Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right

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<sup>79</sup> MN 36: 43 (Ñāṇamoli, 1995: 342).

<sup>80</sup> SN 56: 11 (Bodhi, 2000: 1844).

Concentration; and, *paññā* (wisdom), consisting of Right View and Right Intention.<sup>81</sup> These elements in the path constitute a technique for developing insight into the true nature of reality and the removal or extinguishing of greed, hatred, and delusion. The elements of the path are not steps that are followed sequentially, but rather represent areas of endeavor in a holistic approach to gradually attaining a level of completion or perfection of the specific virtues of an enlightened being simultaneously.<sup>82</sup> In this way, these three divisions of the eightfold path are inter-related and inter-dependent. Cultivating any one area of morality, meditation, or wisdom aids in further cultivation of the others, and is not complete without the cultivation of the others.

#### 1.4. The Role of Ethics in the Buddhist Path

Buddhist ethics may have only relatively recently become a field of academic study, but the central role of *sīla* in the Eightfold Path, with its focus on action, speech, and livelihood, attests to the fact that ethics or morality has always played an important role in Buddhist practice. Just as a focus on suffering and the cessation of suffering is the heart of Buddhist doctrine, so is it at the heart of Buddhist ethics. Thus, the chief concern of Buddhist ethics is behavior that reduces, alleviates, or eliminates both the suffering experienced by oneself and by others.<sup>83</sup> As, the *Mahādukkhakkhandā Sutta* indicates, thirst and attachment are not only the roots of all suffering that one experiences personally, but they are also the roots of the suffering that one inflicts upon

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<sup>81</sup> Skilton, 1997: 33-37; Gombrich, 2006a: 114.

<sup>82</sup> Schmidt-Leukel, 2006b: 38.

<sup>83</sup> Schmidt-Leukel, 2006b: 62-63.

others.<sup>84</sup> Extinguishing thirst and releasing attachment within oneself reduces both the suffering experienced by oneself as well as by others. The *Ambalaṭṭhikārahulovāda Sutta*, which contains the advice of the Buddha to his son Rāhula, advises to consider with every action “Would this action that I wish to do ... lead to my own affliction, or to the affliction of others, or to the affliction of both? Is it an unwholesome ... action with painful consequences, with painful results?”<sup>85</sup> And, it should be noted here that action refers to bodily, verbal and mental activities.<sup>86</sup> With this attention to the effects of all forms of one’s inner and outer actions on oneself and others, inner ethical discipline is related to outward action and social inter-action. This is one of the guiding principles of the *sīla* division of the eightfold path, and must be a part of any formulation of a Buddhist ethical system.

The laity and the monastic *saṅgha* are both required to live by sets of precepts based on the *sīla* division of the eightfold path. *Sīla* is commonly considered a preparation for the other two divisions on the path, *paññā* and *samādhi*.<sup>87</sup> However, Keown notes that while it is quite commonly done, it is incorrect to consider morality (*sīla*) as only a step toward salvific insight or knowledge (*paññā*), which then supersedes or transcends it, rendering it useless as one

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<sup>84</sup> MN 13 (Ñāṇamoli, 1995: 179-185); See also BCA 6: 41-44 (Elliot, 2002: 76).

<sup>85</sup> MN 61: 8-18 (Ñāṇamoli, 1995: 524-526); See also MN 19: 3 (Ñāṇamoli, 1995: 207).

<sup>86</sup> The three divisions of body, speech, and mind are often used by the Buddha when referring to wholesome or unwholesome actions or states, as in MN 88: 8-17 (Ñāṇamoli, 1995: 724-726) and AN 5: 2 (Hare, 1934: 1-2).

<sup>87</sup> Keown, 1992: 8; 2009: 147; Gombrich, 2006a: 114; 2009: 84.

approaches nirvana.<sup>88</sup> Rather both *sīla* and *paññā* are necessary for the attainment of nirvana.<sup>89</sup>

Walpola Rahula also holds this view:

According to Buddhism for a man to be perfect there are two qualities he should develop equally: compassion (*karuṇā*) on one side and wisdom (*paññā*) on the other. Here compassion represents love, charity, kindness, tolerance, and such noble qualities on the emotional side, or qualities of the heart, while wisdom would stand for the intellectual side or qualities of the mind. ...To be perfect one has to develop both equally. That is the aim of the Buddhist way of life: in it wisdom and compassion are inseparably linked together.<sup>90</sup>

Thus, moral, skillful, or karmically meritorious behavior is not merely a step on the path to enlightenment which is then transcended as one gains the necessary insight, but is in fact an essential aspect of the complete level of perfection that is nirvana.<sup>91</sup>

However, because *paññā* is largely seen to develop through the more advanced and disciplined practices of meditation or *samādhi*, which require more free time each day than the average lay follower has typically been able to afford, *sīla* commonly becomes the focus of lay practice. For the laity, Right Speech essentially consists of refraining from lying, hurtful language, or other misrepresentation. The lay precepts based on Right Action include refraining from killing or

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<sup>88</sup> Keown, 1992: 107-128.

<sup>89</sup> Keown, 1992: 8-13.

<sup>90</sup> Rahula, 1974: 46; Keown, 1992: 10.

<sup>91</sup> This discussion of the relationship between karma and nirvana will be continued in relation to the King/Spiro thesis in the following chapter.

causing harm, stealing, sexual immorality, and avoiding intoxicants. Right Livelihood serves as the foundation for lay Buddhist economic activities by outlining ethical principles about how one should go about obtaining and using wealth. These principles include prohibitions on modes of production and wealth acquisition that violate the other ethical principles outlined in Right Speech and Right Action. For example, selling drugs, killing animals, and prostitution are expressly forbidden. Right Livelihood and other Buddhist teachings concerning business principles and economic ethics will be dealt with more fully in the chapter on Buddhist economics.

The *saṅgha* has a lengthier list of monastic precepts which also prohibits inappropriate eating and sleeping habits and personal possession of almost all material goods in addition to more demanding requirements than the basic lay precepts.<sup>92</sup> Monks are only to eat what is given to them as alms food, and are not to eat after noon; they are not to sleep on soft or high beds; and, are not to personally own any material goods beyond a short list of several acceptable personal possessions such as a robe and alms bowl. These monastic ethical precepts are also seen as central to monastic practice in preparing one for the further mental and spiritual development that comes through *paññā* and *samādhi*. Thus, morality or ethics is the foundation for both lay and monastic practice, as well as an essential aspect in the attainment of nirvana.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Harvey, 2000: 51. However, on special occasions such as festivals, the laity often also follows some of the more demanding monastic precepts for a limited period of time.

<sup>93</sup> Gombrich, 2006b: 76; 2006a: 114. Moreover, according to Gombrich, the Buddha stressed that morality was the foundation of *everything* worthwhile in this life and beyond. See Gombrich, 2006a: 64.

Several scholars have drawn comparisons between Buddhist ethics and the influential major moral theories in the Western philosophical tradition as an aid in conceptualizing the nature of Buddhist ethics; most agree on some combination of Utilitarianism, Kantianism or Deontology, and Aristotelianism.<sup>94</sup> The Buddhist focus on reducing suffering for oneself and others has a clear association with the Utilitarian goal of maximizing collective happiness and minimizing suffering as much as possible. Similarly, the Noble Eightfold Path and the corresponding Mahāyāna *pāramitās* all exhibit a clear concern for cultivating certain virtues as essential factors for overcoming unwholesome states and ultimately attaining nirvana. As I have noted, the intention (karma) leading one to inner or outer actions is of key importance in Buddhist thought for attaining a virtuous character and human perfection. These characteristics of Buddhist ethics have much in common with Aristotelian or Virtue Theory. Additionally, Buddhist ethics shares certain commonalities with Deontological ethics, like Kantianism, inasmuch as a good will seems to be the source of goodness or good behavior and other people are to be respected as autonomous agents who have their own goals and ends for their own reasons, and should therefore not be used as means to another's end.

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<sup>94</sup> Peter Harvey and Hsiao-Lan Hu each discuss the different perspectives of leading scholars on this issue. See Harvey, 2000: 49-51, and Hu, 2011: 40-42. Keown argues in favor of Aristotelian Virtue Ethics as the closest, although not perfect, analogy to Buddhist ethics in Keown, 1992: 193-227; Hu notes that David Loy also refers to the combination of Virtue Theory, Deontology, and Utilitarianism in Loy, 2007: 60-61; and, that Abraham Vélez de Cea argues for a similar combination, but with Moral Realism in place of Kantianism, as in Vélez de Cea, 2004: 134-135.

Harvey holds that there are certain commonalities such as these between Utilitarianism or Consequentialism, Kantianism or Deontology, as well as Aristotelian or Virtue Theory; but, he concludes that:

Overall, the rich field of Buddhist ethics would be narrowed by wholly collapsing it into any single one of the Kantian, Aristotelian or Utilitarian models, though Buddhism agrees with each in respectively acknowledging the importance of (1) a good motivating will [Kantianism], (2) cultivation of character [Aristotelianism], and (3) the reduction of suffering in others and oneself [Utilitarianism]. This is because the first two of these are seen as crucial causes of the third of them, while aiming at the third, in a way which does not ignore aspects of the full karmic situation, is a key feature of the first two.<sup>95</sup>

Hu similarly determines that a combination of these approaches with additional insights is evident in Buddhist ethics:

[I]n the rubric of Buddhist ethics, an action is worth undertaking not just because it is supposed to be virtuous, or just because it is considered good by others, or just because it brings pleasant results for the self, or just because it brings pleasant results for others. Rather, an action is worth undertaking when all of these considerations are combined. Being “wholesome” involves comprehensively considering things from all angles in the web of interconditionality, including one’s own motivations, the various perspectives of the people involved, and the reverberations of the action in its particular context.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Harvey, 2000: 51.

<sup>96</sup> Hu, 2011: 41.

Here again, Hu points to the teaching of interdependent co-arising as key to understanding Buddhist thought. In addition to the other concerns typical of Western moral theories, she notes that one must also be aware of the web of causal connections to recognize the causes and effects of the various actions and states, and be free from entanglement in egoistic attachments.<sup>97</sup>

### **1.5. The Path of the *Arahat***

Perfecting each of the eight factors or *aṅgas* of this ‘Middle Way’ path, leads one to enlightenment and liberation from *saṃsāra* in nirvana. The gradual realization of these truths leads one through a series of succeeding stages of spiritual development with increasing levels of virtue, wisdom, and insight in degrees of liberation from all forms of greed, hatred, and delusion.<sup>98</sup> In the Theravāda tradition, as in the other early Buddhist schools collectively referred to as Śravakayāna, the first stage one reaches on this path is that of the *sotāpanna*, or the ‘stream enterer’, who will attain enlightenment in no more than seven more rebirths in human or heavenly realms. The *sakadāgāmin*, or ‘once returner’, will be reborn as a human no more than one time before attaining enlightenment. The *anāgāmin*, or ‘non-returner’, will be reborn in a heavenly realm where he will attain enlightenment. And, finally, the *arahat*, or ‘the worthy one’, has already attained enlightenment and liberation from *saṃsāra* in this life and will enter fully into nirvana at death. Attaining the level of *arahat* by fully realizing the *Dhamma* taught by the Buddha is the goal for followers of the Theravāda tradition. Upon fully realizing the *Dhamma*,

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<sup>97</sup> Hu, 2011: 41-42. Here she draws upon Gier, 2004.

<sup>98</sup> Gombrich, 2006b: 75.

the *arahats* then follow the example set by the Buddha in teaching the *Dhamma* to others for their remaining years.

## 1.6. The Mahāyāna *Bodhisattva* Ideal

As a later critical response to the Śravakayāna and Theravādin goal of *arahatship*, Mahāyāna Buddhism focuses on the *bodhisattva*, a being on the path to perfect Buddhahood. The goal here is not to attain enlightenment or liberation only, but also further to become a Buddha who brings the *Dhamma* to a world that has lost its truths, with the express purpose of benefiting the countless other beings immeasurably. Although Theravāda Buddhism also recognizes *bodhisattvas* as supreme spiritual beings, they are generally understood to be extremely rare, and only in the Mahāyāna does the *bodhisattva* become the goal for all followers. This shift in the goal entails a shift in focus on other teachings and practices as well. Keown points to a shift from the Theravādin focus on the personal development of the central virtues of wisdom or insight and the practice of morality to the focus on wisdom or insight and compassion toward others that distinguishes the Mahāyāna ethics.<sup>99</sup> This focus on perfecting wisdom and compassion is clearly identifiable as predominant in the *bodhisattva* path.

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<sup>99</sup> Keown, 1992: 130-131.

### 1.6.1. The *Bodhisattva* Path

The *bodhisattva* path begins with developing the supreme altruistic motivation, *bodhicitta*, the Mind of Enlightenment or Awakening Mind, which arises from deep compassion for the suffering of others.<sup>100</sup> Śāntideva expresses this as:

This mind to benefit living beings,  
Which does not arise in others even for their own sakes,  
Is an extraordinary jewel of a mind,  
Whose birth is an unprecedented wonder.<sup>101</sup>

*Bodhicitta* is expressed as a commitment to pursue enlightenment for the benefit of all other beings. According to the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, being filled with great compassion for the countless other beings he sees, the *bodhisattva* swears, “I shall become a savior to all those beings, I shall release them from all their sufferings!”<sup>102</sup>

The path continues with the pursuit of six *pāramitās*, or perfections: *dāna* (giving), *śīla* (morality/ethics), *vīrya* (energy), *kṣānti* (patience), *samādhi* (meditation), and *prajñā* (wisdom).<sup>103</sup> These bear some resemblance to the factors of the Noble Eightfold Path insofar as the *bodhisattva* virtues of *śīla*, *samādhi*, and *prajñā*, as mentioned above, are also the three main

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<sup>100</sup> Williams, 2009: 195; Schmidt-Leukel 2006b: 97-98.

<sup>101</sup> BCA 1: 25 (Elliot, 2002: 9).

<sup>102</sup> AP 403 (Conze, 1970: 161).

<sup>103</sup> Schmidt-Leukel, 2006b: 99-101; Skilton, 1997: 111. Later Mahāyāna traditions often include four additional perfections: *upāya* (skillful means), *praṇidhāna* (the vow to achieve Buddhahood), *bala* (power), and *jñāna* (knowledge).

categories into which the Eightfold Path is often divided in the Theravāda tradition.<sup>104</sup> *Dāna* is a central virtue in the *bodhisattva* path, as well as in a discussion of poverty relief, and will be discussed in greater detail below. The practice of the first five perfections culminates in the perfection of wisdom in which the *bodhisattva* realizes *śūnyatā*, or the fundamental emptiness that pervades all reality.

In essence, *śūnyatā* opposes dualistic thought, indicating that there is ultimately no genuine difference between self and other, or even between nirvana and *saṃsāra*; any such apparent distinctions result from ignorant or misguided perceptions. In the *bodhisattva* ideal, this perfect wisdom unites with perfect compassion, the desire to end the suffering of all other beings.<sup>105</sup> Thus, a *bodhisattva* must strike a balance in the seeming paradox between compassion in identifying all beings and their suffering with him or herself, and wisdom in recognizing that the concept of a self is empty of true independent reality, meaning therefore that a self does not genuinely exist in anything more than a conventional sense.<sup>106</sup>

Similar to the Theravādin stages leading to *arahatship*, the Mahāyāna also outlines a set of stages on the *bodhisattva* path leading toward perfect Buddhahood.<sup>107</sup> Perfect Buddhahood follows the passing of the final stage on the path. The first stage is entered after the arising of *bodhicitta* and

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<sup>104</sup> Schmidt-Leukel, 2006b: 99-100.

<sup>105</sup> Skilton, 1997: 111.

<sup>106</sup> Schmidt-Leukel, 2006b: 118; AP 29 (Conze, 1970: 11).

<sup>107</sup> The ten stages are the Joyful, the Stainless, the Luminous, the Radiant, the Difficult to Conquer, the Face to Face, the Far Going, the Immovable, the Good intelligence, and the Cloud of the Dharma. The Chan or Zen tradition, however, favors a spontaneous form of enlightenment.

each stage following is marked by increasingly exalted virtue and form in higher realms. The sixth stage is believed to be equivalent to the insights needed to become an *arahat*, but the *bodhisattva* is said to then continue through an additional four stages, mastering all aspects of the *Dhamma* and gaining an ability to manifest multiple forms, to finally fulfill the *bodhisattva* vow by becoming a perfected Buddha.<sup>108</sup>

Lay followers in the Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions can be noble persons who have undertaken the path to perfection, either as stream-enterers or *bodhisattvas*, but the conventional distinction between the lay and the monastic *saṅgha* blurs somewhat more in the Mahāyāna. *Bodhisattvas* are commonly referred to as either home-dwelling (*grhastha*) or home-departed (*pravrajita*), and may fill one of a wide range of social roles, making it more common, for example, to find more advanced or enlightened practitioners who continue to remain farmers, heads of household, or even political rulers.<sup>109</sup>

#### 1.6.1.1. Generosity and Compassion

Two key Buddhist virtues related to the *bodhisattva* ideal are closely associated with the Buddhist concept of poverty relief and deserve closer attention here. They are *dāna*, meaning generosity or giving, and *karuṇā*, meaning compassion. The Mahāyāna sūtra, *Dānapāramitāsamāsaḥ*, links these two virtues, indicating that the ornaments of a *bodhisattva* are the marvelous streams of virtue that result from “the thought of giving attended by

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<sup>108</sup> Skilton, 1997: 111-112.

<sup>109</sup> Meadows, 1986: 66.

compassion.”<sup>110</sup> While these virtues are also essential to Theravāda Buddhism, they receive added emphasis and weight in Mahāyāna teachings; they are also of special interest in this study because of their clear connection to the concept of poverty relief or poverty alleviation.

### 1.6.1.2. *Dāna*

*Dāna* is perhaps the most basic and central virtue in both the Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions for effecting karmically skillful or fruitful actions, and its importance cannot be overstated as regards its role in Buddhist social interaction. In the Pāli Canon, as well as in later scriptural texts, *dāna* is a universally applicable virtue that monks and lay followers alike are urged to perfect.<sup>111</sup> In addition to lay followers, the monks likewise are enjoined to develop *dāna*, primarily by giving the teachings of the *Dhamma*, but also by providing other necessary material goods to the needy. The act of giving is so universally applicable and fundamental in Buddhist thought that in the Mahāyāna *Upāsakaśīla-sūtra* even those who seem to have nothing, like the poor lay followers and the monastic *saṅgha*, are told to give.

In the Mahāyāna tradition, the role that *dāna* plays in the path to enlightenment is more overtly highlighted as a key perfection to pursue that facilitates the attainment of the other essential perfections. The *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* describes the inter-relationship between *dāna* and the other perfections:

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<sup>110</sup> PS 1: 17 (Meadows, 1986: 161).

<sup>111</sup> DN 33: 36-41 (Walshe, 1995: 485); AN 8: 22-23 (Hare, 1932: 146); Sizemore, 1990: 103-106.

Because Bodhisattvas benefit sentient beings by giving them material goods, they benefit them through generosity. Because they benefit beings by not impoverishing them, not harming them, nor scorning them, they benefit them through ethics. Because they benefit them by not considering [their own] impoverishment, harm, or scorn, they benefit them through patience. Thus they benefit sentient beings through these three [perfections].<sup>112</sup>

*Dāna* is also significant as the primary symbol of one of the highest Buddhist religious values, self-sacrifice.<sup>113</sup> One particularly poignant example of self-sacrifice from the Theravāda tradition is the well-known Jātaka tale of a previous life of the Buddha as a hare who sacrificed himself to become a meal for a hungry ascetic.<sup>114</sup> Thus, the culmination of the perfection of *dāna* becomes the willingness to sacrifice everything—even one’s own flesh and life. In *The Bodhicaryāvatāra*, Śāntideva says:

To begin with, Buddha, the Guide, encourages us  
 To practice giving such things as food.  
 Later, when we become used to this,  
 We can gradually learn to give our own flesh.  
 When eventually we develop a mind  
 That regards our body as being just like food,  
 What discomfort shall we feel

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<sup>112</sup> ASN, Chapter 9 (Powers, 1995: 239).

<sup>113</sup> Meadows, 1986: 63, 70.

<sup>114</sup> Jat 316 (Davids, 1929: 131-135).

From giving away our flesh?<sup>115</sup>

Similarly, in the *Dānapāramitāsamāsaḥ*, Ārya-Śūra states:

After that, he who is intent on the welfare of the world must apply himself to the method of giving that there is no ungainliness due to recoil from the practice, even if someone asks for his own limbs.<sup>116</sup>

Meadows stresses that the directive to sacrifice one's life and flesh is only intended to point to the *bodhisattva's* willing self-sacrifice in a spiritual sense through a general altruistic concern for the welfare of others:

On the most general ethical level, giving the body means that the bodhisattva places the welfare of others before his own, that altruism and self-sacrifice are the guiding principles of his social behavior. In more specific doctrinal terms, it also means that his concern for the spiritual realization of the world compels him to postpone his own entry into nirvana, so that he can continue to work for others within the saṃsāric realm."<sup>117</sup>

Thus, the perfection of *dāna* is an essential step on the *bodhisattva* path and is directly related to the relief of suffering through means of material offerings as well as through spiritual teachings and guidance.

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<sup>115</sup> BCA 7: 25-26 (Elliot, 2002: 99).

<sup>116</sup> PS 1: 2 (Meadows, 1986: 157).

<sup>117</sup> Meadows, 1986: 72.

### 1.6.1.3. *Karuṇā*

As I have indicated, combined with wisdom, *karuṇā*, meaning compassion, is a cardinal virtue in the Mahāyāna tradition. Compassion for all other sentient beings is said to be the motivation for the accumulation of wisdom, and for perfecting all of the six key virtues along the *bodhisattva* path. As the *Upāsakaśīla-sūtra* asserts, “Good son, compassionate thought is the producing cause of the six perfections.”<sup>118</sup> Śāntideva similarly points to compassion as the chief virtue by noting in the extremely influential *Śikṣā-Samuccaya*, that contained in the one virtue of great compassion “all the virtues of the bodhisattva are included.”<sup>119</sup> So important is it in the *bodhisattva* path that another extremely popular text, *The Bodhicaryāvatāra*, indicates that “actions that are otherwise proscribed” or forbidden are in point of fact permitted if done in compassion for the benefit of another.<sup>120</sup> In this way compassion in the Mahāyāna may at times even take the form of the over-riding virtue that justifies other acts—even those very acts that would normally otherwise be forbidden.

The *Upāsakaśīla-sūtra* identifies the recognition of the state of suffering of other sentient beings in various circumstances as the method to cultivate compassion.<sup>121</sup> Śūnyatā, the key Buddhist teaching that refers to the emptiness of inherent existence in all phenomena and the unity of the experiencer and the experience, is exemplified in relation to compassion towards others in the *Śikṣā-Samuccaya*; Śāntideva argues that *bodhisattvas* should constantly identify with other

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<sup>118</sup> Uss, Chapter III (Shih, 1994: 17).

<sup>119</sup> SS XVI: 286 (Bendall, 1922: 261).

<sup>120</sup> BCA 5: 84 (Elliot, 2002: 58).

<sup>121</sup> Uss, Chapter III (Shih, 1994: 14-16).

beings since there is no genuine difference between others and self, and one should act to prevent the suffering of any being.<sup>122</sup> By the same token, in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* he asks “why should I not conceive my fellow’s body as my own self?”<sup>123</sup> Correspondingly, he proclaims, “I must destroy the pain of another as though it were my own, because it is a pain,” demonstrating that there is no genuine difference between one’s own suffering and that of another—there is only suffering.<sup>124</sup> But, it must also be acknowledged that compassion is not only important in the Mahāyāna tradition, but is also imperative in the Theravāda and other early schools as one of the four *brahmavihāras* (divine abidings) that practitioners are to cultivate through meditative practices. By cultivating the virtues of loving-kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), altruistic joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*), one is assured of rebirth into a divine realm. And when these virtues are coupled with the insight into the true nature of all reality, ultimate release in nirvana is finally won.<sup>125</sup>

## 1.7. Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the key Buddhist teachings that make up the Buddhist world-view and that will serve as the foundation for a further examination of the concepts of poverty and poverty relief in Buddhist thought. Despite the noted diversity within the Buddhist tradition, which seems to have been evident since its earliest history, there are also some key doctrines that are virtually universal among all schools of Buddhism and that can be therefore said to represent the tradition.

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<sup>122</sup> SS XIX: 357-361 (Bendall, 1922: 315-317).

<sup>123</sup> BCA 43 (Barnett, 1909: 88).

<sup>124</sup> BCA 43 (Barnett, 1909: 88).

<sup>125</sup> AN 4: 125-126 (Woodward, 1933: 132-135).

While this does not present an essential definition of Buddhism, it does outline some core beliefs that are characteristically similar to a degree throughout the various schools. The central focus on the Buddha's teachings is the ultimate liberation from all forms of suffering. The Buddha's first teachings contained in the Four Noble Truths outline the causes of suffering, and that it can be overcome through the cultivation of key virtues and the elimination of defilements or unwholesome states; this core message has remained consistent throughout later schools as well. By developing the prescribed virtues, such as moral discipline, generosity, compassion, and insight, and thereby overcoming greed, hatred, and attachment one may attain nirvana—the ultimate release from the cycle of rebirths, and the ceasing of *karma*, suffering, and thirst. In keeping with the heart of the Buddhist message and Buddhist ethics, many of the key Buddhist virtues making up the path to enlightenment relate to alleviating the suffering of others as well as oneself. This is especially the case with compassion and generosity. Compassion is said to involve a recognition and concern for the suffering of others, while generosity requires giving directed at improving the lives of others.

Poverty fits within this Buddhist world-view as a particular kind of suffering—that grievous form of suffering which is caused by a lack of the basic requirements for survival, for active participation within society and for meaningful participation in the Buddhist community and development along the path to enlightenment. The following chapters will more fully develop a Buddhist concept of poverty by examining the meaning of poverty, its causes and effects, and duties to relieve poverty that are found in Buddhist texts. However, before examining the concepts of poverty and poverty relief, it will be helpful to first address the general approaches to Buddhist social ethics, specifically considering the role of the individual in society. Questions

concerning the proper relationship between individuals and the broader society, the monastic *saṅgha*, and the political rulers, have been at the center of Buddhist studies for generations. The next chapter will outline the major positions in this debate and current thinking regarding social roles and responsibilities in Buddhist social ethics in order to provide a background for a discussion of the more specific duties related to economy and poverty relief.

## 2. Buddhist Social Ethics

The fact that poverty is a major source of significant suffering for both individuals and societies in the modern world is undeniable. In Buddhist thought, due to the underlying interdependence and inter-relatedness of phenomena in the natural world, the suffering or well-being of others cannot be fully and authentically divorced from one's own. As such, the relationship between the individual and society, a topic of debate at the center of Buddhist studies since its inception in the West, is closely related and essential to understand when addressing Buddhist perspectives on the issue of poverty. So, how are individual spiritual pursuits related to moral demands concerning others in social or economic ethics?

Academic approaches to the role of the individual in society in Buddhist social ethics have varied widely, initially with early descriptions in the West of the tradition as wholly asocial; this became a sort of accepted wisdom among Westerners, while more recent descriptions based on more extensive readings of the Pāli Canon as well as anthropological and sociological data commonly portray the social relationships as fundamentally and deeply interdependent and inter-related by nature. The Pāli Canon is of particular importance here because it offers the best glimpse possible at the teachings regarding social relationships taught among the earliest Buddhists, regardless of whether they are actual or ideal, from a time when accounts describing the manner in which Buddhists related to one another and to the broader Indian society are otherwise scarce. While the passages outlining the relationships between the monastic *saṅgha*, the lay followers, and the rulers are often prescriptive, describing the manner in which these

social groups ought to relate, they also provide illustrative examples of particular actual historical relationships.

## **2.1. Major Approaches to Buddhist Social Ethics**

In this chapter, I will review major approaches to the issue of Buddhist social ethics, relying on the writings of Max Weber, Melford Spiro, and Payutto Bhikkhu as examples of the most influential and common approaches. Following Payutto's focus on the interdependent nature of the social relationships portrayed in the Pāli Canon, I will outline the particular scriptural texts that serve as a foundation of Buddhist social ethics.

### **2.1.1. Max Weber: Buddhism as the Quintessentially Asocial Religion**

The earliest studies of Buddhism in the West commenced near the beginning of the nineteenth century, typically envisioning a religion fully committed to an individualistic pursuit of salvation or liberation. The writings of the father of the sociology of religion, Max Weber, who directly addressed the nature of Buddhist social ethics and their economic effects, exemplify this approach to Buddhist social ethics. These early approaches in Western scholarship often portrayed Buddhism as primarily a philosophy focused on individual liberation from this world, or nirvana, most often through mental cultivation in order to transcend all forms of desire, and therefore tended to discount or ignore social relationships or practices.

In his influential study, *The Religion of India*, originally published in 1916, Weber aimed to demonstrate why the particular form of capitalism that developed in conjunction with Protestant

Christianity required protestant values and therefore could not have also arisen among Buddhism and the other eastern religions.<sup>126</sup> With this goal in mind, Weber characterized Buddhism as essentially inadequate and lacking in the requisite ethical framework. In Weber's view, Buddhism teaches a form of salvation that is fundamentally opposed to the notion of social responsibility or social ethics. He saw in Buddhism "an absolutely personal performance of the self-reliant individual. No one, and particularly no social community, can help him. The specific asocial character of genuine mysticism is here carried to its maximum."<sup>127</sup> To Weber, Buddhism is wholly asocial and "anti-political", an other-worldly religion only interested in an individual form of salvation as a means of transcending all aspects of this world.<sup>128</sup> As Weber understood it, this highly individualistic path to enlightenment entailed transcending all forms of desire or passion, including any notions of brotherly love or compassion.<sup>129</sup> For Weber, the Buddhist non-self teaching of *anattā* particularly precluded genuine compassion toward others, and any notion of social ethics, or social responsibility based upon the infinite value of a human 'soul'. Thus, in this view, the welfare of others is of very limited concern—only so far as it relates to one's own individual salvation, or, in the case of the monastic *saṅgha*, insofar as the other is able to provide alms to support them in their own pursuits.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Weber, 1958.

<sup>127</sup> Weber, 1958: 213.

<sup>128</sup> Weber, 1963: iii; 1958: 206, 213, 218-219.

<sup>129</sup> Weber, 1958: 208, 213.

<sup>130</sup> Weber, 1958: 206-208, 214, 233.

Weber's perspective on Buddhism shaped Buddhist studies in the West to a high degree for generations.<sup>131</sup> Ronald Green summarizes three main reasons that have been commonly advanced by Western scholars to support the Weberian view of a Buddhism unconcerned with social ethics.<sup>132</sup> Firstly, the doctrine of *anattā* is said to fundamentally undermine moral concern for the welfare of others. Presumably, it is supposed that in the same way that the concepts of self and other are undermined by this teaching, so is any notion of moral responsibility of one individual toward other individuals. Secondly, if nirvana is viewed as a strictly individualistic and transmundane goal of liberation from this world of *samsāra*, then only the most rudimentary and undeveloped social ethics guiding interactions in the world is possible in Buddhist thought. Thirdly, the law of karma is said to undercut any critical examination of the social and economic order and as a substitute instead promotes a passive acceptance of what is assumed to be the just order of things. These points help explain the enduring appeal of Weber's view and present a clear framework to follow here in a critique of this approach.

Weber attempted to identify the source of the perceived deficiencies in Buddhist social ethics in key Buddhist doctrines, such as karma and *anattā*. He correctly identified key Buddhist teachings which in fact do have a strong influence on the Buddhist world-view, but it is doubtful that Buddhists have commonly understood these doctrines in the same way that he interpreted them is, and it is questionable whether those teachings indeed affect Buddhist social ethics in practice in the particular ways he and his adherents have claimed. In particular, the ethical implications of the doctrine of *anattā* require a mistaken interpretation of the doctrine in order to

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<sup>131</sup> Bond, 1988: 23.

<sup>132</sup> Green, 1990: 222-234.

reach the conclusions of the Weberian view. Rather than interpreting it as fundamentally undermining any moral concern for others as Weber does, the non-self teaching is commonly interpreted instead as actually encouraging actions expected to result in the welfare of all beings since one's own suffering or well-being is inextricably bound to that of others.<sup>133</sup> In this way, an understanding of *anattā* dissolves selfishness and greed by removing the deluded attachment to ego, establishing a sense of interdependency and inter-relatedness among other beings and facilitating the cultivation of the key Buddhist virtues of loving-kindness, compassion, and generosity towards others.<sup>134</sup> As a result, rather than undermining moral concern for others, *anattā* in fact promotes the very virtues that can form a foundation for social responsibility and moral concern for others. As previously noted, *anattā* is commonly understood as standing in opposition to ego and selfishness, while the notion that it removes moral concern would be a strange and mistaken interpretation of the doctrine.

For Weber, the wholly 'other-worldly' nature of Buddhism in teaching an individual form of salvation was the primary obstacle to genuine social responsibility. Donald Swearer has countered the view that nirvana is solely an individualistic goal. Contrary to the Weberian view that Buddhism is fundamentally an 'other-worldly' religion, Swearer notes that the concern of Buddhism is not exclusively an individual pursuit of nirvana, but also includes 'this-worldly' concerns as well, some of which are of necessity related to other beings. As Swearer summarizes

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<sup>133</sup> This is how the non-self teaching is generally understood in Buddhist ethics. See, for example, Harvey, 2000: 36-37.

<sup>134</sup> Manuel Sarkisyanz, for example, identifies *karuṇā*, or compassion as the result of the implication of the non-self teaching that one's own suffering is not independent of the suffering of others. See Sarkisyanz 1965: 40-41.

it, “the goals of Buddhism are, in short, both nibbanic and proximate—a better rebirth, an improved social and economic status in this life, and so on; the two are necessarily intertwined.”<sup>135</sup> The individual pursuit of liberation or enlightenment does not necessarily preclude collective concerns, but in fact requires it through the cultivation of virtues which are practiced through moral conduct toward others as outlined in the Eightfold Path taught by the Buddha. As Hu states it, “the central teachings of the Buddha carried in the early and foundational Nikāya texts, such as interdependent co-arising, non-Self, and five aggregates, in effect, denied the very possibility of purely individualistic spiritual advancement.”<sup>136</sup>

The combination of collective and individual concerns is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the *bodhisattva* vow to aid in the liberation of all beings, which is at once a commitment to the well-being of others as well as a step toward one’s own enlightened state. Additionally, related to this point, Harvey Aronson has argued against the Weberian portrayal of the notion of equanimity which presents the ideal Buddhists as completely dispassionate and indifferent toward others in their pursuit of transcendence, experiencing “only the feeling of neither-pleasure-nor-pain.”<sup>137</sup> Contrary to this representation, Aronson maintains:

The discourses, commentaries, and historical records, however, indicate a different picture of the ethical ideal of Theravada Buddhism as well as the results of its practice.

[The Buddha], the paradigm of practice, followed an altruistic ethical ideal and exhorted his disciples to do the same. Motivated by an interest in others’ well-being, he achieved

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<sup>135</sup> Swearer, 2010: 2.

<sup>136</sup> Hu, 2011: 42.

<sup>137</sup> Aronson, 1980: 78-96.

enlightenment and went on to be involved with society through his teaching. He was capable of a wide range of attitudes and feelings: a man with kindness, concern, and joy. [The Buddha] actively shared his insights, touched others' hearts, and moved them to follow him.<sup>138</sup>

The final point Green suggests that supports the Weberian view is that the doctrine of karma promotes a passive acceptance of circumstances as cosmic justice. Yet the claim that belief in karma as cosmic justice undermines the possibility of an active social ethic presupposes a deterministic form of karma in which virtually every state or event is necessarily caused or predetermined and just. If everything we experience now is simply the just karmic result of some previous actions, attempts at social or economic reform are not only misguided, but also futile. This simplistic and deterministic understanding of karma not only lacks firm support, but is in fact specifically repudiated by the Buddha in the Pāli Canon. This deterministic view is included in a set of three views explaining the role of karma that the Buddha disavowed:

There are certain recluses and brāhmins who teach thus, who hold this view: Whatsoever weal or woe or neutral feeling is experienced, all that is due to some previous action. There are others who teach:—Whatsoever weal or woe or neutral feeling is experienced, all that is due to the creation of a Supreme Deity. Others teach that all such are uncaused and unconditioned. Now, monks, as to those recluses and brāhmins who hold and teach the first of these views, I approach them and say: 'Is it true, as they say, that you worthy sirs teach that ... all is due to former action?' Thus questioned by me they reply: "Yes, we do." Then I say to them: So then, owing to a previous action men will become murderers,

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<sup>138</sup> Aronson, 1980: 96.

thieves, unchaste, liars, slanderers, abusive, babblers, covetous, malicious, and perverse in view. Thus for those who fall back on the former deed as the essential reason there is neither desire to do, nor effort to do, nor necessity to do this deed or abstain from that deed. So then, the necessity for action or inaction not being found to exist in truth and verity, the term ‘recluse’ cannot reasonably be applied to yourselves, since you live in a state of bewilderment with faculties unwarded.<sup>139</sup>

Prebish and Keown note, “The Buddha made a distinction between karma and deterministic fate (*niyati*) in this sense, and accepted that random events and accidents can happen in life. Not everything need have a karmic cause, and winning the lottery or catching a cold can be simply random events.”<sup>140</sup> Not only are there random events, but, in fact, one’s own intentions and desires can lead to wholesome or unwholesome actions or states. Murderers, thieves, liars, recluses or monks are not predetermined states that one is born into, but are in actuality the results of a complex of intentional, but optional and avoidable, decisions and behaviors. While moral actions and intentions do result in karmic outcomes, not everything that happens in life is the direct and necessary result of the karma generated by previous actions. If such were the case, all actions would be wholly predetermined by the karmic results of all previous actions, effectively rendering moral choices impossible.

Contrary to this Weberian view, Green notes that in point of fact a clear understanding of the law of karma leads one to act in a manner that will ensure that one’s present condition is improved in

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<sup>139</sup> See, for example, AN 3: 61 (Woodward, 1932: 157-161).

<sup>140</sup> Prebish, 2006: 47.

the current life and any future lives.<sup>141</sup> This in itself is enough to encourage proper ethical behavior within society. Furthermore, to return to the previous point, the doctrine of karma taught in the Pāli Canon includes a collective aspect in which individual actions and intentions may affect all of society in turn and vice versa.<sup>142</sup> As I have indicated, at its essence Buddhist ethics teach that reducing individual suffering and misconduct also reduces the suffering that one inflicts upon others. Hence, rather than precluding the possibility of a social ethic, the notion of karma instead provides a firm foundation for ethical behavior within the interpersonal and social realm.

Hu makes this point clear by pointing out the implications of interdependent co-arising on notions of individualism and karma:

The teaching of interdependent co-arising deconstructs the concept of independent “Self” that stays uninfluenced by its surroundings, but by no means does it dissolve moral responsibilities of individuals. Quite the contrary, what is revealed by co-arising is the fundamental sociality and interconditionality of human existence. According to co-arising, an individual is constituted in the existing socio-cultural contexts, and the socio-cultural contexts are in turn constructed and reconstructed through individuals’ actions. It is in this light that the Buddha’s ethicization of the long-existing term *kamma* can be rightly understood. Inasmuch as a person interdependently co-arises with the contexts she

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<sup>141</sup> Green, 1990: 224.

<sup>142</sup> See for example, DN 26 (Walshe, 1995: 395-405), in which the immorality of the political ruler is revealed to substantially affect all of society; the resulting collective immorality then also hinders the prospect of individual spiritual development within society.

or he is in, and with the people around her or him, every volitional action functions to reconfigure the socio-cultural contexts as well as one's own personality and character, and every person is directly or indirectly responsible for the well-being of others. This complex social implication of interdependent co-arising can be further accentuated by taking a look at the contemporary socio-economic and environmental studies on the global situations. What seems to be individual *kamma* more often than not has its social and even global impacts, and the cessation of *dukkha* depends on all those who are tangled in the same *kammic* web of existence realizing the social dimensions of their actions and striving to be socially aware and conscientious.<sup>143</sup>

The ultimate deficiency in Weber's analysis of the results of Buddhist teachings on social and economic thought, however, is that it takes little notice of the interactions between the monastic *saṅgha* and the lay followers beyond the one-sided lay function of supporting the monastic *saṅgha*. David Gellner offers this critique:

By paying no attention to the Vinaya (monastic discipline) texts, Weber underestimated the all-important role of the Sangha (monastic community) in the life of the monk. He also underestimated the degree to which early Buddhism had already accommodated itself to lay religious interests and therefore included elements of prayer, deification of the Buddha, and so on.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Hu, 2011: 28. See also 91-125.

<sup>144</sup> Gellner, 2001: 37.

By ignoring these fundamental and reciprocal relationships among the laity and the *saṅgha*, Weber was left with a view of Buddhism that appeared exceedingly individualistic and solitary. Commenting on the content of the *vinaya* texts, Gregory Schopen counters this view:<sup>145</sup>

Although the *vinaya* texts were written by monks and for monks, they often have little in common with the image of the Buddhist monk that is commonly found in our textbooks, and even in many of our scholarly sources. That image ... presents the Buddhist monk as a lone ascetic who has renounced all social ties and property to wander or live in the forest, preoccupied with meditation and the heroic quest for nirvana or enlightenment. ... The monk [of the *vinaya* texts] is caught in a web of social and ritual obligations, is fully and elaborately housed and permanently settled, preoccupied with worldly matters- bowls and robes, bathrooms and doorbolts, etc.<sup>146</sup>

Schopen continues:

The *vinaya* texts we know are little interested in any individual religious quest, but are very concerned with the organization, administration, maintenance, and smooth operation of a complex institution that owned property and had important social obligations.<sup>147</sup>

Stanley Tambiah similarly criticized Weber's depiction of the asocial and other-worldly pursuits of the monastic *saṅgha* as underplaying the "highly formalized and systematized technology of meditation and ascetic practices," and ignoring the *vinaya* texts which detail elaborate social

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<sup>145</sup> Schopen, 1995: 473-502.

<sup>146</sup> Schopen, 1995: 473.

<sup>147</sup> Schopen, 1995: 475.

rules for the monastic *saṅgha*, whose very objective was “the promotion of ‘brotherly’ conduct among the members of the monastic community.”<sup>148</sup> Indeed, perhaps unaware of the texts related to monastic discipline that promote such brotherly conduct, Weber had explicitly claimed that such brotherly love or compassion stood in direct opposition to the mystical and undifferentiated affection known to Buddhism.<sup>149</sup> It is understandable that Weber might overlook the *Vinaya* texts, which were not well-known to Western scholars at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. But, the more important oversight on his part, and the less understandable omission, is that he gave only the most cursory treatment of the very teachings that are the most related to economics and which are found at the very heart of the path to nirvana- namely, Right Livelihood.<sup>150</sup> These he interpreted as only of marginal importance, rather than as essential a component of the Noble Eightfold Path that the Buddha outlined as are the other factors which were the focal point of his analysis.

### **2.1.2. Melford Spiro: Nibbanic, Kammatic, and Apotropaic Buddhism**

In his highly influential account of Burmese Buddhists, Melford Spiro largely followed Weber’s analysis.<sup>151</sup> Spiro developed a three-fold classification system of the Theravāda Buddhism as

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<sup>148</sup> Tambiah, 1984: 324.

<sup>149</sup> Weber, 1958: 208.

<sup>150</sup> Weber, 1958: 215.

<sup>151</sup> Spiro, 1971.

practiced in Burma, comprised of Nibbanic, Kammatic, and Apotropaic divisions.<sup>152</sup> Nibbanic Buddhism in this classification refers to the teachings, practices, and concerns of the *saṅgha*, the monastic community that is primarily focused on the pursuit of final liberation or nirvana through the more advanced ascetic practices of the Eightfold Path which often lead to a withdrawal from worldly concerns.<sup>153</sup> Kammatic Buddhism, on the other hand, is concerned ultimately with striving to attain a better rebirth, such as in the human or heaven realms, and to prevent negative karmic consequences like rebirth in a lower realm of existence. This is accomplished primarily by following the basic precepts outlined above, and generating karmic merit through *dāna*– this largely through donations to support the monastic *saṅgha*, although other forms of generosity are also included.<sup>154</sup> The final division in Spiro’s model is Apotropaic Buddhism, a classification that represents a primary concern of making use of magical powers that are associated with the *Dhamma*. Primarily this is for some sort of protection, such as from natural or even supernatural dangers.<sup>155</sup>

Under this schema, the vast majority of Buddhists throughout history would fall under the Kammatic Buddhism division. As Stewart McFarlane explains:

In Buddhist societies both past and present, 'Nibbanic Buddhism', or the systematic following of the Path (*magga*), with the overt intention of rapidly gaining liberation and

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<sup>152</sup> Winston King had reached similar conclusions and proposed a similar classification in King, 1964, although I focus here solely on Spiro for the sake of simplicity and brevity. For a critique of King, see Keown, 1992.

<sup>153</sup> Spiro, 1970: 31-65.

<sup>154</sup> Spiro, 1970: 66-139.

<sup>155</sup> Spiro, 1970: 140-161.

the spiritual status of being an arahat (Sanskrit arhat, 'worthy one') is the concern of a minority of monks within the sangha. The majority of devout Buddhists, including most monks, are concerned with what Spiro describes as the 'proximate salvation' offered by 'Kammatic Buddhism'.<sup>156</sup>

Spiro concluded from his observations in Burma that most Buddhists simply tried to keep the basic precepts primarily in order to avoid the negative karmic consequences of breaking them, such as rebirth in a hell, rather than primarily in the pursuit of nirvana.<sup>157</sup> In a manner similar to what was earlier proposed by Weber, those following the Nibbanic path, on the other hand, were said to seek primarily to transcend this world by following the advanced practices of the Eightfold Path. Ironically, Spiro stated that these divisions should not be seen as independent or 'neat bundles', and yet he then took this latter view in stating their fundamental discontinuity.<sup>158</sup>

Spiro's classifications are frequently used among Western scholars due to their effectiveness at presenting the complexity of understandings of the Buddhist teachings and goals that can exist within a culture.<sup>159</sup> However, the rigid division of these spiritual aims in his model has been the target of criticism from scholars nonetheless. In his critique of Spiro's thesis, Damien Keown finds fault with the radical distinction he makes between actions aimed at karmic fruitfulness and those aimed at observing the Eightfold Path for attaining nirvana, identifying the Kammatic

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<sup>156</sup> McFarlane, 2001: 189.

<sup>157</sup> Spiro, 1971: 449.

<sup>158</sup> Spiro 1971: 12, 68.

<sup>159</sup> Bailey, 2003, for example, uses this classification in their sociological account of early Buddhism.

sphere with the laity and the Nibbanic with the monastic *saṅgha*.<sup>160</sup> As indicated in the previous chapter, the attainment of nirvana requires the perfection of all aspects of the Eightfold Path, particularly the combination of both moral virtue and insight.<sup>161</sup> Karmic merit generated through moral virtue cannot, therefore, be fully isolated from the pursuit of nirvana, and relegated to just one sociological group. Making reference to sociological and anthropological work in Southeast Asia, Keown further refutes the sharp distinction between lay and monastic goals, demonstrating that a general complementarity exists in respect to the lay and monastic goals of rebirth and nirvana.<sup>162</sup> Individual Buddhists can and do pursue both goals, often simultaneously as karmic merit moves them closer towards a good rebirth as well as nirvana.

Contrary to Spiro's model, striving primarily to gain merit that will ensure a good rebirth does not necessarily preclude the lay follower from maintaining the ultimate goal of attaining nirvana in a future life and pursuing both goals simultaneously. A chief reason that a good rebirth is valuable is precisely because it brings a greater possibility of attaining nirvana. By the same token, karmic merit also plays its own part in the division of Nibbanic Buddhism as well insofar as moral conduct serves as the foundation of the more advanced practices leading to the insight necessary for attaining nirvana. While Spiro's model is helpful in identifying the complexity and diversity of aims within a Buddhist community, it also harbors a danger in seeing the goals as representing different paths pursued by distinct groups and fails to accentuate the inter-relatedness of the goals.

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<sup>160</sup> Keown, 1992: 83-92. See also Katz, 1982: 175-180.

<sup>161</sup> Keown 1992: 83-105.

<sup>162</sup> Keown here refers to the works of Richard Gombrich, Michael Carrithers, and Jane Bunnag. See Gombrich, 1971; Carrithers, 1983; Bunnag, 1973.

### 2.1.3. Payutto Bhikkhu- Social Ethics and the Pāli *Vinaya*

A more balanced approach than those of Weber and Spiro in regards to the role that the individual plays in social, political and economic matters and the relationship between this and enlightenment has been expounded more recently by Bhikkhu Payutto. In ‘Foundations of Buddhist Social Ethics’, Payutto responds to scholars who he maintains misrepresent Buddhism as an ascetic religion, taking the whole of Buddhism to be simply the religion of a group of monks and conflating the ideal of Buddhist ethics with the metaphysical aspects or meditative practices of the monks.<sup>163</sup> He observes, “Buddhism is the religion or way of life not only of the monks, but of the laity as well”; the monks only make up a part of the Buddhist community, and represent only a part of Buddhist ethical reflection.<sup>164</sup> According to Payutto, Buddhist ethics should be seen as comprised of both *Dhamma*, as in law or doctrine, and *vinaya*, or discipline. In this way, he identifies both the pure doctrines and the manner in which they are applied to daily life as essential aspects of Buddhist ethics. Furthermore, Payutto notes that the Pāli Canon identifies the ‘four assemblages’ comprising the Buddhist community as made up of the male and female lay followers, and the monks and nuns, concluding that the monks and the laity are intended to be seen as complementary sides of a single moral community.<sup>165</sup> In his view, the differences between the laity and the monks and nuns are not radical ones; rather, lay and monastic ethics and practices are merely different and complementary aspects of the single community. These social groups are necessarily interdependent and inter-related in the pursuit of

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<sup>163</sup> Rājavaramuni, 1990: 29-53. Payutto writes this book chapter under the name Phra Rājavaramuni.

<sup>164</sup> Rājavaramuni, 1990: 29.

<sup>165</sup> Rājavaramuni, 1990: 32; See also Harvey, 2000: 88-89.

their liberating goals. Payutto's approach is helpful in identifying the commonalities among the lay followers and the monastic *saṅgha*, while simultaneously recognizing that certain differences exist. While their roles in society and daily practices may clearly differ, the guiding principles and virtues, and both proximate and ultimate goals are remarkably similar.

## **2.2. Buddhist Social Ethics in the Pāli Canon**

Following the approach that Payutto Bhikkhu outlined in 'Foundations of Buddhist Social Ethics', certain clear principles forming the foundation of Buddhist social ethics are evident in Buddhist teachings early enough to be included in the Pāli Canon. Because these form the essential framework used for approaching Buddhist notions of poverty and poverty relief in later chapters, they will be detailed further here.

### **2.2.1. Moral Behavior of Individuals Benefits Society at Large.**

In accordance with the key Buddhist teaching of inter-dependence, ethical and moral behavior is said to benefit not only individuals on their path toward liberation, but also to benefit society as a whole. In the first case, individual ethical and moral conduct reduces the suffering inflicted upon others, but the influence that one's virtuous behavior has on the behavior of others should also be considered. Passages in the Pāli Canon, such as the *Cakkavatti-Sihanāda Sutta*, explicitly refer to widespread moral degeneration of society resulting directly from the immoral behavior of the king.<sup>166</sup> In this sutta, the pervasive immorality only begins to reverse, after a period of brutality and chaos, when particular citizens undertake moral discipline and once again establish the

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<sup>166</sup> See, for example, DN 26 (Walshe, 1995: 395-405).

beginnings of a moral and peaceful society. This passage will be dealt with more fully later, but for now, a general principle to be gleaned is that a spiritual and temporal interdependence among the main social groups in the Buddhist tradition—the political rulers, the *saṅgha* and the laity. The actions of the political ruler as well as the actions of the monastic *saṅgha* each had wide-reaching effects on broader society and the individuals within it.

### 2.2.2. Social Groups Are Interdependent and Inter-related

Various passages in the Pāli Canon affirm the interdependency of the major social groups in their social roles. In the *Itivuttaka*, for example, the Buddha teaches:

Bhikkhus, brahmins and householders are very helpful to you. They provide you with the requisites of robes, almsfood, lodgings, and medicine in time of sickness. And you, bhikkhus, are very helpful to brahmins and householders, as you teach them the Dhamma ... with its correct meaning and wording, and you proclaim the holy life in its fulfilment and complete purity. Thus, bhikkhus, this holy life is lived with mutual support for the purpose of crossing the flood and making a complete end of suffering.<sup>167</sup>

Thus, while the role of the laity in providing material support to the *saṅgha* is well-known and often noted, this passage concludes with the message of mutual support between these groups for the purpose of attaining enlightenment. The mutual interdependence exists on both the spiritual and temporal planes. On the temporal level, the *saṅgha* relies on the donations from the laity and the king, as well as on the stable society and necessary political freedoms provided by the king,

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<sup>167</sup> Itv 111 (Ireland, 1997: 186); Rājavaramuni, 1990: 33-34.

in order to properly function and fulfill their role in society. The laity similarly relies on the king to provide a society that is safe, crime free, and prosperous. They often rely on the *saṅgha* to provide a level of education to many, and the needy in society may also rely on the *saṅgha* for donations of material goods, such as food, clothing, etc., although the chief contribution from the *saṅgha* is said to be spiritual. The king relies on the laity to pay taxes and follow the laws he institutes, and relies on the *saṅgha* to legitimate his rule and encourage the laity to follow and respect him.

Ideally, on a spiritual level, the king and laity both rely on the *saṅgha* to teach them the *Dhamma* and give them advice according to it, to act as moral exemplars who model an alternative set of values pointing toward advancement on the path to enlightenment. In practicing the *Dhamma*, the king is also to act as an example or ideal for the householder laity to follow in their daily lives. And, in turn, the moral and ethical conduct of the laity and king provides the appropriate setting for the spiritual striving of the *saṅgha* and the rest of society. In this way, the social groups are all interdependent and individuals within them rely on each other for the proper functioning of society, and to fulfill their own duties and roles within society, as they strive for enlightenment and a good rebirth.

This is, of course, a representation of the ideal social relationships—an ideal that is at times at odds with the historical reality. The relationship between the monastic *saṅgha* and the throne in particular is more complicated than the idealistic view presents. Somboon Suksamran, for example, has written on the relationship between the monastic *saṅgha* and the government in the process of political modernization of Thailand since the 1960s and while his study identifies relationships among these social groupings in modern Thai society similar to those outlined in

canonical texts, he also points to clear cases in which the groups made use of one another due to political motivations less grounded in doctrine.<sup>168</sup> Historically these groups have colluded, relying on each other for legitimation before the lay public, while also at times clashing in power struggles. Trevor Ling points out that these complementary relationships may have simply come about quite naturally in early Indian Buddhism as the interests of the rulers and the interests of the *saṅgha* coincided, when “an ideology which needed a supportive political power met a political ruler looking for a legitimating ideology.”<sup>169</sup>

There is some ambivalence toward politics in that the Buddha taught on a number of politically relevant topics, seems to have often associated comfortably with kings and their courts, and established rules in the *saṅgha* that precluded enemies of the state from entry, and yet on the other hand he also spoke of kings as dangerous and that at times they may be justly disobeyed and overthrown.<sup>170</sup> And, a result of this ambivalence there has been a tension between the rulers and the *saṅgha* historically, in which kings have at times ordered the death and disestablishment of the *saṅgha* and particular members, and on the other hand, *saṅgha* members have called for the overthrow or attempted assassination of what they considered unjust rulers.<sup>171</sup> Conversely, there also is a certain danger in the collusion of the two groups, which can lead to corruption if the *saṅgha* gives political and moral legitimation to an unjust ruler in exchange for the position in society as religious authorities. Ian Harris suggests that “a healthily functioning Buddhist polity is one in which the respective powers of king and sangha are held in a state of antagonistic

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<sup>168</sup> Suksamran, 1976.

<sup>169</sup> In his preface to Suksamran, 1976: xi.

<sup>170</sup> Harris, 1999.

<sup>171</sup> Harris, 1999: 5-9.

symbiosis.”<sup>172</sup> Conceding that the complicated historical reality of the relationships between these major social groups is often at odds with the ideals, it is nonetheless helpful to recognize and identify the ideal social and political relationships outlined in the texts.

### 2.2.3. Role of Kings/Political Rulers

In the Pāli Canon, a good king is characterized as the ideal lay member. Having not undertaken the vows of the *saṅgha*, by fully retaining his material possessions, and social and familial duties, the king remains a member of the laity and should strive to live according to the lay precepts and perfect the Buddhist virtues. The ideal ruler represented in the Theravāda tradition is the *Cakkavatti* ruler. As a representation of the spiritual and temporal ideals in the Buddhist tradition, the *Cakkavatti* king is sometimes paired with the Buddha as his political equivalent who is born with the same remarkable bodily features, although he has not attained enlightenment and therefore remains subordinate to the Buddha.<sup>173</sup> The duties of the king outlined in Buddhist scriptures are primarily to provide moral leadership by following the *Dhamma* and to provide a safe society and stable economy. The *Cakkavatti-Sihanāda Sutta* details the duties of the universal rulers:

But what, sire, is the duty of [a *Cakkavatti* king]?" "It is this, my son: Yourself depending on the Dhamma, honouring it, ... acknowledging the Dhamma as your master, you should establish guard, ward and protection according to Dhamma for your own household, your troops, your nobles and vassals, for Brahmins and householders, town

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<sup>172</sup> Harris, 2007: 3.

<sup>173</sup> Harvey, 2000: 114.

and country folk, ascetics and Brahmins, for beasts and birds. Let no crime prevail in your kingdom, and to those who are in need, give property. And whatever ascetics and Brahmins in your kingdom have renounced the life of sensual infatuation and are devoted to forbearance and gentleness, ... if from time to time they should come to you and consult you as to what is wholesome and what is unwholesome, what is blameworthy and what is blameless, what is to be followed and what is not to be followed, and what action will in the long run lead to harm and sorrow, and what to welfare and happiness, you should listen....<sup>174</sup>

These duties are also detailed in the exceedingly influential *Kūṭadanta Sutta*, in which the king is told to fulfill his duties to provide a safe society, free from crime and other social ills, and to practice the Buddhist virtue of giving—particularly to the poor and to support the *saṅgha*.<sup>175</sup> Here the Buddha recounts the narrative of a sacrifice which he had performed as the head priest or chaplain for a king in a previous life in order to instruct the brahmin Kūṭadanta in the correct manner of performing a great sacrifice. The king was pleased with the wealth and land he had accumulated and wanted to offer a sacrifice that would be to his “lasting benefit and happiness.”<sup>176</sup> The Buddha, as the high priest, instructed him that before offering the sacrifice he must first eliminate the plague of thieves destroying villages and towns across the countryside. He taught the king that raising taxes, threatening, imprisoning, executing or banishing the thieves would not remove the plague from his kingdom. Only giving to his subjects could successfully

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<sup>174</sup> DN 3: 61 (Walshe, 1995: 396-397).

<sup>175</sup> DN 5: 127-149 (Walshe, 1995: 133-141).

<sup>176</sup> DN 5: 135 (Walshe, 1995: 135).

remove the plague; he further instructed the king to give grain and fodder, capital, and proper living wages to subjects in his kingdom. Once the king had done this, the plague of thieves was removed. The Buddha, in the role as high priest, then taught the king that giving alms-food and shelter to monks and joining the *saṅgha* are the greatest ‘sacrifices’ one can offer. Thus the king is to rule by moral example, establishing peace and prosperity, and providing for the needs of the *saṅgha*. And, rather than rule by harsh punishments, he is instead to exemplify the Buddhist virtues, as he is instructed by the *saṅgha*.

#### **2.2.4. Role of Lay Followers**

The role of the lay followers in Buddhist society as outlined in the Pāli Canon is chiefly to establish the ideal circumstances for spiritual advancement. This is accomplished primarily through moral discipline in fulfilling social roles, by following the Buddhist precepts and perfecting the Buddhist virtues. Most importantly, this entails providing the material needs for the monastic community, but also includes supporting a righteous king through paying taxes, and following the laws of the land.

The key relationships of the lay followers are divided into six groups in the *Sigālaka Sutta*: parents and children, teachers and students, wife and husband, friends and companions, workers and employers, and ascetics or monks and lay people.<sup>177</sup> The lay followers are to exemplify Buddhist virtues in relationships with each of these groups. Friendship is a common principle in virtually all of these relationships; friends are to show generosity in giving to one another, to

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<sup>177</sup> DN 31 (Walshe, 1995: 461-469).

speak kind words, to be helpful, to treat one another with respect and sincerity, and to keep one's word. In Payutto's view, friendship is a central principle in Buddhist social ethics.<sup>178</sup> Hu reaches the same conclusion, referring to the Buddha's advice in the *Māgandiya Sutta* to associate with "true men".<sup>179</sup> "The Buddha said that association with good friends would bring one to hear the *Dhamma*, would prompt one to practice accordingly, and would allow one to know for oneself the formation and cessation of *dukkha* (i.e., co-arising)."<sup>180</sup> This is also evident in the *Kosalasamyutta Sutta*, in which the Buddha corrects his close follower Ānanda, for claiming that good friendship constitutes a full half of the holy life:

Not so, Ānanda! This is the *entire* holy life, Ānanda, that is, good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship. When a bhikkhu has a good friend, a good companion, a good comrade, it is to be expected that he will develop and cultivate the Noble Eightfold Path.<sup>181</sup>

The reciprocal and complementary nature of the relationship of interdependence between monks and the laity is evident in the duties outlined in the Pāli Canon. It is said in the *Sigālaka Sutta* that the lay followers are to show loving deeds, words and thoughts to the monks by opening their house to them and providing them with their material needs. In return the monks are to show compassion toward the lay followers by discouraging them from evil, teaching them of the benefit of good actions, loving them with a kind heart, helping them hear what they have not

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<sup>178</sup> Rājavaramuni, 1990: 32-36.

<sup>179</sup> Hu, 2011: 43; MN 75: 25 (Ñāṇamoli, 1995: 616).

<sup>180</sup> Hu, 2011: 43.

<sup>181</sup> SN 3: 18 (Bodhi, 2000: 180); emphasis added.

heard, clarifying what they have already heard, and pointing them to a heavenly state.<sup>182</sup> It is worth noting that it is said that the gods not only worship the Buddha as a spiritual superior, but also those followers of the Buddha that put the Buddha's message in practice; this includes the virtuous lay followers who maintain these relationships properly as well as the *arahats* and other monks and nuns.<sup>183</sup>

As previously indicated, the virtue of *dāna*, or generosity, is central to Buddhist teachings, and is particularly important to lay practice in the Pāli Canon. That generosity is directed primarily toward the *saṅgha* as the most fruitful source of generating merit, although not exclusively so.<sup>184</sup> The Buddha taught the householder Anāthapiṇḍika that the perfection of generosity, or having a heart free of stinginess and delighting in giving charitable gifts, leads one to obtaining certain desirable conditions which includes wealth for oneself and one's family and friends. One is said to seize opportunities and turn them to fruitful merit when wealth is used to make family and friends secure and happy, and offerings are given to living relatives, guests, deceased relatives, kings and gods.<sup>185</sup>

Additionally, in the *Ghaṭṭikāra Sutta*, the potter Ghaṭṭikāra receives a great benefit by generously giving his wares away for free. In return he is supported by the king and his neighbors.<sup>186</sup> Ghaṭṭikāra is praised for his generosity and for looking after his blind parents and also attending

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<sup>182</sup> D 31 (Walshe, 1995: 461-469).

<sup>183</sup> SN 11: 920-924 (Bodhi, 2000: 334).

<sup>184</sup> Jat 424 (Cowell, 1895: 280-282).

<sup>185</sup> AN 4: 60-62 (Woodward, 1933: 73-78).

<sup>186</sup> MN 81 (Ñāṇamoli, 1995: 669-676); MN Notes 81: 794-795 (Ñāṇamoli, 1995: 1286).

upon Kassapa Buddha with complete reverence. Furthermore, the *Vighāsa Jātaka* tells of a previous life of the Buddha as the god Sakka in which he taught a group of renunciants that one should first give alms to recluses, brahmins, and beggars, and then live on the “remnants left from charity.”<sup>187</sup>

There are also important instructions to the lay followers related to business and economics found in the Pāli Canon. In this realm, the role of the lay-followers in society has in this modern era of globalization expanded to rival and in some cases even eclipse the role of the rulers or the state. One of the results of globalization has been the globalizing of a world economy and the emergence of large multi-national organizations that can significantly influence laws and regulations that affect the lives of virtually the entire world’s populations and can do so with little regard for national borders or cultural norms. While householders and lay-follower businessmen historically have exerted influence locally, today it can be argued that multi-national corporations rival states in their influence on the economy and much of public policy. As lay institutions, the teachings on social and economic ethics found in the canonical sources should apply to both the small householder and businessman as well as to the large multi-national corporations. These teachings mainly revolve around the Right Livelihood aspect of the Eightfold Path, which provides instructions concerning the manner in which an income is to be earned and spent, but there are also more detailed instructions to employers and employees. The topic of wealth and poverty will be covered in detail in Chapter 4, while Buddhist economic principles will be covered further in the Chapter 3. In short, the lay followers are encouraged to industriously engage themselves in pursuing wealth through ethical and wise means—connoting

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<sup>187</sup> Jat 393 (Cowell, 1895: 193-194).

a non-attachment and contentment with simplicity—and to use the wealth they earn to benefit themselves and others. In so doing, the lay followers are to engage themselves in industrious pursuits to prevent or escape from poverty, and to undertake activities which help others to do so as well.

### **2.2.5. The Role of the *Saṅgha***

The duties of the monastic *saṅgha* outlined in the Pāli Canon include undertaking vows of simplicity and the ownership of only minimal personal possessions, receiving charitable donations from the laity and the rulers in order to allow them to benefit from the karmic merit, and instructing the laity and rulers in living according to the *Dhamma* so that individuals and society can prosper. The *saṅgha* makes alms-rounds, seeking donations for their material support. In turn, they provide the opportunity to gain merit, and also strive to perfect generosity by giving the *Dhamma*.<sup>188</sup>

The life of simplicity, a form of voluntary poverty, is central to one's spiritual development along the path to liberation. By voluntarily undertaking this life of simplicity, the monks and nuns embody an alternative set of values, representing the ideal example of spiritual pursuits.

Examples concerning the role that monks play in instructing the kings in ruling virtuously have been presented above; the kings who remove the plagues, famines, and other social ills from their kingdoms are typically presented as doing so by following the advice of a monk or ascetic counterpart. The monks are portrayed as contributing to the economic prosperity in a kingdom

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<sup>188</sup> SN 20: 9 (Bodhi, 2000: 710-711).

by teaching the rulers and lay followers to live according to the *Dhamma*.

According to Payutto, whether or not it was a function of the monasteries originally, over time they came to offer goods and services to the needy in society, such as providing food, clothing, education, medical care and more.<sup>189</sup> This role of the *saṅgha* in poverty relief will be discussed further in Chapter 5. Two brief examples of the karmic merit generated from charitable giving to the *saṅgha* as a way of eliminating poverty are instructive here, though. One noteworthy passage is found in the *Sāma Jātaka* which tells of parents who are thrust from wealth into extreme poverty because their son enters the *saṅgha*.<sup>190</sup> Upon hearing that this has happened to his beloved parents, the monk considers leaving the *saṅgha* to become a householder and provide for his parents. Instead, he decides to use the alms that he receives to support them, thereby remaining faithful to his vow of homelessness. After some time, another monk discovers that he has been giving his alms to his parents who are lay followers. He explains that it is unlawful to waste the alms of the faithful by giving them to lay followers, and reports it to the Buddha. The young monk is thereby made to feel ashamed of what he has done, but, rather than reprimand him, the Buddha repeatedly praises him for his actions. Moreover, the Buddha tells him that he also provided for his parents by making rounds asking for alms in a previous life. This tale is of particular interest here because it indicates that, contrary to the widely held views, certain social responsibilities, such as providing material support for the needy, seem to outweigh or supersede the highly important vow to forsake personal property and the social standing based on family or wealth by entering the *saṅgha*.

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<sup>189</sup> Rājavaramuni, 1990: 38.

<sup>190</sup> Jat 540 (Cowell, 1907: 38-52).

Additionally, in the *Kuṇḍaka-Kucchi-Sindhava-Jātaka*, the Elder monk Sāriputta is said to have rescued a woman from poverty simply by accepting an invitation to dine at her door.<sup>191</sup> The poor old woman asked the clerk to send a monk to her home so she might offer dinner, but all the monks except for Sāriputta had already been assigned to other homes for dinner. When word had spread that Sāriputta would be dining with the poor woman, the king and other impressed neighbors sent money to her home to buy food, clothing, and entertainment. So much money was sent to her on that day that she became wealthy. Her reward is both physical and spiritual as she is edified and converted by the kindness and gratitude of Sāriputta. Here we see another example of the mutual support and interdependence among the social groups for their collective well-being.

### **2.3. Conclusion**

This chapter has addressed the key issues related to a social ethical theory. The early Western studies of Buddhism tended to identify it as a religion of monks that focused on the individual pursuit of nirvana and sought to transcend virtually all worldly desires and relationships. Although some version of this approach has endured in the writings of many scholars since the time of Max Weber, it has been subject to much criticism and widely rejected in favor of approaches that highlight the interdependent relationships among the monastic *saṅgha* and the laity.

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<sup>191</sup> Jat 254 (Cowell, 1895: 199-203).

In this chapter, I dealt with the underlying questions of the relationship between the individual's role in broader society, and more particularly the relationship between karmic merit and the path to nirvana. Contrary to the common misconception that the ideal in Buddhism is to transcend all desires or passion, including such virtues as compassion and generosity, Keown has demonstrated that these virtues not only serve as the foundation for the development of the necessary liberating insight, but are also essential for attaining nirvana. Thus, whether an individual focuses on the proximate goal of attaining a good rebirth in coming lives, or on the ultimate goal of attaining nirvana, generating karmic merit through moral discipline is essential. Buddhist teachings thus include motivation toward social betterment as well as toward personal spiritual development.

Relying on the approach of Payutto, as well as additional passages from the Pāli Canon and Jātaka Tales, I also outlined some key relationships within Buddhist society that illustrate the interdependence between the monastic *saṅgha*, the laity, and the rulers. In Payutto's view, both the Buddhist community and Buddhist social ethics include diverse perspectives of all of these social groupings. All of them rely on one another for support in fulfilling their own roles and responsibilities, as well as in pursuing liberation. Recognizing the complementary nature of these key relationships is essential to an understanding of how these groups are to undertake poverty relief in Buddhist social ethics. In the following chapters I will address the notions of wealth and poverty found in the Pāli Canon and various Mahāyāna sūtras, and also the duties outlined therein to relieve the suffering of the poor. As I will demonstrate, these social groupings have an interest in the relief of poverty in their society, and each have specific roles in doing so detailed in Buddhist scriptures.

## **Part II. Buddhist Conceptions of Poverty & Poverty Relief**

### **3. Buddhist Economics**

It should be clear at this point that the Buddhist tradition exhibits concern for ‘this-worldly’ affairs and that appropriate social relationships form an important aspect of Buddhist morality. Buddhist social ethics demand that proper behavior in relationships be performed in the marketplace just as it is demanded more broadly in society; arguably, the marketplace is where individuals exert the greatest and most far-reaching influence in the lives of others. In addition to the principles outlined previously concerning social ethics found in the Pāli Canon and Mahāyāna sutras, additional passages concerning more overtly economic principles are also found. In this chapter, I will provide an overview of the key principles outlined in Buddhist scripture that are most relevant to economic ethics. I will also briefly outline the growth of a movement toward the development of a Buddhist economics. While some writers have taken up the task of developing an economic system based on Buddhist principles to rival and even replace the dominant Western economic systems, others are skeptical of the possibility of success in such a colossal undertaking and have the more modest goal of offering a critique of misguided values of mainstream economic models in order to transform the global economy into a more ethical one.

Simon Zadek argues that the central questions of concern are “whether we can believe any longer that the secular trajectory of economic development typical of industrialized countries is sustainable over the long, or possibly over the not so long, term”; and whether the role of

religion “in some shape or form, offers a basis for evolving more effective mechanisms for survival, let alone reasonable levels of well-being, for the majority.”<sup>192</sup> Concerning the role that Buddhist principles can play in the economic realm, Zadek cautions, “we should not underestimate the difficulty of thinking about a modern economy based on a Buddhist economics.”<sup>193</sup> Zadek contends that the diversity of thinking in the fields of Buddhism and economics raises difficulty in reflecting accurately the real wealth of Buddhism or its meaning for economics.<sup>194</sup> Neither Buddhism nor Western economics are monolithic entities, but reflect a wealth of opinions and practices. Moreover, although he points to deficiencies with Western economic models, Zadek remains skeptical of the assumption that a Buddhist economics can develop to the point of fully replacing the dominant Western models.

Does Buddhist Economics then resolve what are seen as valid economic questions of our time? Does it throw light, for example, on the matter of inflation, of interest rates, or on the most appropriate rate of technological progress? Does it inform us as to the optimal rates of taxation, of savings, or of social security? The answer to this must be broadly negative. Buddhist Economics does not answer these questions directly, and in all probability will never do so in any clear-cut manner. Furthermore, the argument that this apparent 'deficiency' arises through the infant-nature of the discipline is not really sustainable, since there is nothing apparent in its underlying principles (at least to me)

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<sup>192</sup> Zadek, 1993: 433.

<sup>193</sup> Zadek, 1997.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

that foreshadows revelation on these subjects. Shortcomings in these areas do not, however, mean that Buddhist Economics has nothing to offer.<sup>195</sup>

In Zadek's view, although it may not offer complex analysis of highly specialized economic topics on par with the dominant economic theories and systems, Buddhist economics can make important contributions to Western economics. It offers principles of behavior associated with the appreciation of the interdependent nature of existence and notions of well-being; it proposes alternative means of conceptualizing our experience in the social and non-social spheres; and, it offers a means of interpreting economic practices in the context of Buddhist principles and associated individual aims.<sup>196</sup> In brief, even if the goal of completely replacing the global economy may be unrealistic, not so that Buddhist economics can offer critiques and alternative ways of conceptualizing issues, particularly ethical issues, within the field of economics that address certain deficiencies and thereby can have a real influence on the global economy.

Over roughly the last decade, a broad movement towards more pluralistic approaches to economics has gained considerable traction with the potential to change fundamentally the future of the entire field of economics.<sup>197</sup> These approaches generally urge a rethinking of the basic assumptions of dominant mainstream economics and the privileged position of mainstream economic approaches as the final authority on all economic matters; instead, they highlight the value of multiple viewpoints and methodologies in constructing the best approaches for particular areas and issues, such as unemployment or distributive justice. While the theoretical

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> Fullbrook, 2008.

possibility of genuine engagement between the fields of religion and economics may remain questionable, as well as the very notion of a truly religion-based economics, religious ethical and moral systems also can and do offer meaningful critiques of, and contributions to, economic thought and analysis. Despite the obvious conflict that arises between religious notions of authority, such as divine revelation, and the foundation of reason and data analysis as the basis of economic methodologies, religious moral and ethical systems do intersect with economics and can make a profound contribution to the undertaking of returning ethics and moral values to the foundation of the field of economics.<sup>198</sup> A growing number of economics scholars affirm the inseparable nature of ethics and economics, arguing that economic theory is founded on value judgments from the outset, making it impossible to fully detach it from discussions of ethics and morality.<sup>199</sup> If the movement persists and the field of economics continues to become more welcoming of heterodox approaches, more open to the notions that economic values are founded to some extent on culturally derived value judgments, and of the notion that different systems of thought can, therefore, likely contribute to a more comprehensive approach to both global and local economic issues, then Buddhist economics will likely continue to garner increasing interest among economists and scholars as its contributions to the endeavor of economic analysis become more apparent.

Generally speaking, Buddhist economics addresses the general Buddhist notions of wealth and poverty and the manner in which fundamental Buddhist teachings apply to practical concerns of how to apply the principle of Right Livelihood, including concerns of appropriate modes of

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<sup>198</sup> See, for example, Haneef, 2008.

<sup>199</sup> Dutt, 2010: 17-34.

production, distribution and consumption of goods, in addition to questions of political economy and political social thought. Over the last few decades, Buddhist economics has garnered increasing interest among scholars of religious studies, economics, anthropology, as well as business management and organizational development. The gap in literature by scholars knowledgeable in the Buddhist tradition and these other disciplines concurrently is gradually diminishing as the contributions made by Buddhist economics to discussions in these fields increases. This chapter will outline the general Buddhist principles and doctrines gleaned from the Pāli Canon that apply to the economic realm and have commonly been used in discussions of economy, and will then briefly outline the development of Buddhist economics as a topic of scholarship broadly. This will serve as a foundation for a more detailed focus on the specific issue of poverty in the following chapter.

As is also the case with the broader field of Buddhist ethics, Buddhist economics largely came about as an area of study near the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, taking hold predominantly in Theravāda Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia. Approximately since the early 1970s, a number of Buddhist leaders and scholars have sought to extract the teachings on economics and business from Buddhist scripture and use them as guiding principles in formulating a coherent and, in so far as possible, a reasonably complete economic system. While such economic principles are clearly evident throughout the Pāli Canon and have guided Buddhist leaders and scholars in the past, devising an economic system that is in line with these principles of Buddhist thought on a scale comparable to the dominant Western system is a formidable undertaking that is still very much in its infancy. Because the passages in Buddhist scripture that clearly and directly deal with economic issues often do so only in general or vague terms, the task of explicating a set of

basic principles that can form a rich Buddhist economic theory or system is largely a creative endeavor in which each contributor to the task must make assumptions or suggestions about how the principles might or ought to apply to contemporary economic issues or discussions. This pursuit has not been a wholly academic one, however; some political leaders in Southeast Asia have attempted openly to apply some form of Buddhist economic theory to national economic policies and have achieved some successes, such as King Bhumibol Adulyadej's much praised Sufficiency Economy in Thailand.<sup>200</sup> I will not focus on actual economies of Buddhist nations here, however, as it lies beyond the scope of this introduction to economic ethics, although I will describe some key examples of attempts to implement community development or poverty alleviation projects based on Buddhist principles in this and following chapters. My focus here is instead on the Buddhist teachings and principles related to economics that can serve as a foundation for economic analyses, policies, and that are likely to exert a noteworthy influence on the general economic behaviors and that form a connection between morality and ideal economic activities.

### **3.1. Buddhist Attitudes Concerning Wealth**

Much like the relationship between the individual pursuit of enlightenment and the moral demand of social responsibilities is easily misconstrued, the concepts of poverty and wealth and their proper roles in the Buddhist tradition also easily lend themselves to misunderstanding. There is some ambivalence in the Buddhist conceptions of poverty and wealth. On the one hand, wealth is commonly praised and its accumulation often encouraged, even to the point of

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<sup>200</sup> See Baker, 2007: 20-35. See also Warr, 2009.

overwhelming extravagance. Stories praising wealthy lay donors are certainly not infrequent in the Pāli Canon. The most popular of these must be the stories of the extravagant wealth and generosity of the affluent householder Sudatta who earned the nick-name Anathāpiṇḍika, meaning ‘feeder of the poor’ or ‘feeder of the orphans and helpless’, for his enormous donations to the poor and the *saṅgha*.<sup>201</sup> Yet, on the other hand, voluntary poverty is even more frequently praised in the Canon as a virtue, in the form of simplicity, with the abandonment of personal possessions and wealth plainly designated as an essential step on the path to final liberation.

To understand clearly the Buddhist concepts of poverty and wealth, it is helpful to begin with an understanding of the traditional Brāhmanic teachings on wealth that set the background and framework for the Buddha’s teachings. Once wealth is seen in the proper light as a worthy goal of the laity, although it is also still to be forsaken by the monastic *saṅgha*, the attitude toward material possession becomes clearer. Distinctions can then be made between the Buddha’s teachings on material poverty as simplicity and material poverty as deprivation, which will follow in the next chapter.

### **3.1.1. *Artha*: Wealth as a Worthy Goal**

As I have indicated previously, the dominant religion in India at the time of the Buddha was Brāhmanism; the influence that it, as well as Jainism, had on the Buddha and his followers is significant. The Brāhmanic views set the backdrop and established an Indian world-view that the Buddha and virtually all of his followers, associates, and adversaries would have been familiar

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<sup>201</sup> Falk, 1990: 124-143.

with. The Buddhist teachings on wealth in particular are highly influenced by Brāhmaṇism. Basing their teachings upon the ancient scriptures known as the *Vedas*, the Brāhmaṇs specified three worthy goals in life for all mankind (*puruṣārtha*): living in accordance with one's duties or righteousness (*dharma*); gaining wealth and power (*artha*); and, enjoying the sensual pleasures of life (*kāma*).<sup>202</sup> The later *Śramaṇic* movement—a broad movement which included the Buddha as well as Mahāvīra, the founder of Jainism—looked beyond these worldly pleasures to an ultimate bliss found outside of this world and a release from a cycle of rebirths and the subsequent re-deaths. Thus, the *Śramaṇas* added a fourth and supreme goal of life, *mokṣa*, signifying the release from this cycle of rebirths. Although disagreeing with the other *Śramaṇas* on certain points, particularly on what he perceived as an unnecessarily austere path to this ultimate liberation, the Buddha agreed fully with the general *Śramaṇic* criticism of the inadequacy of the Brāhmaṇic goals, and with the necessity of an ultimate liberation from the recurring cycle of births and deaths.

However, although the Buddha considered the Brāhmaṇic model inadequate, he did not see it as wholly incorrect or useless. The Buddha preserved the roles of *dharma*, *artha*, and *kāma* as worthy goals of life, even while subordinating them to the final and highest goal of *mokṣa*. Thus, while the members of the monastic *saṅgha* forsake common worldly goals and devote themselves to the attainment of enlightenment in this lifetime and final liberation, the lay followers nonetheless are encouraged in the pursuit of wealth, power, and sensual pleasure, as proximate or immediate goals—provided that they are pursued in an ethical or moral way, in keeping with the basic Buddhist precepts and virtues. While these 'this-worldly' goals and the

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<sup>202</sup> Schmidt-Leukel, 2006b: 13-14; See also Scharfe, 2007: 250-254.

‘proximate salvation’ of a better rebirth may be considered inferior to the final liberation of nirvana, as Stewart McFarlane points out, “it should be emphasized that there is nothing improper or un-Buddhist about limiting one's aims to this level of attainment.”<sup>203</sup> As detailed previously, lay followers may pursue these worthy immediate goals of life while simultaneously looking forward to arriving at a stage, in this life or in another, and as a result of the karmic fruitfulness of their behaviors, of forsaking all worldly possessions and social standing by entering the monastic *saṅgha* in order to pursue their final goal of ultimate liberation.

### 3.2. Economic Principles in Buddhist Thought

Indian society seems to have undergone a number of significant socio-economic changes shortly before the time that the Buddha came onto the scene.<sup>204</sup> The growth of large cities played an important role in the growth of Buddhism as many early followers came from a growing class of merchants and traders in these urban centers.<sup>205</sup> While the traditional Brāhmanic structure faltered in providing this new class of wealthy merchants a desirable status and sanction for their livelihood, the Buddhist teachings offered a more universal ethic that emphasized thrift and diligence, and looked favorably upon trade, money-lending and certain types of debt.<sup>206</sup> Some of the appeal to these wealthy merchants was the full social inclusion the Buddhist teachings offered, one that was based upon behavior rather than birth, as well as the prospect of securing a better rebirth largely through the simple practice of giving donations to the monastic *saṅgha*.

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<sup>203</sup> McFarlane, 2001: 188.

<sup>204</sup> Bailey, 2003: 260-262.

<sup>205</sup> Bailey, 2003: 16-18.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

With the assuredly heightened awareness of socio-economic changes taking place in Indian society, let alone the perennial and perpetual concern over material needs, it would be hard to imagine a burgeoning new religious movement like Buddhism spreading so successfully without giving some attention to the real economic concerns of its followers and potential converts.

### **3.2.1. Early Buddhist Teachings on Economy**

As should be expected, numerous passages in the Pāli Canon reveal a concern over economic matters among the Buddha and his followers at an early stage. Because the historical records from this time in India are otherwise somewhat scarce, the Pāli Canon has been an important source for evidence of social and economic teachings since the time of the earliest recorded history of the Buddhist tradition. It is even more important here because the pursuit of Buddhist economics has largely been the endeavor of Theravāda Buddhists who hold the Pāli Canon as the highest authoritative source of the Buddha's teachings. Furthermore, the Mahāyāna sūtras that contain economic teachings essentially mirror the general economic principles outlined in the Pāli Canon. Many of the Buddha's sermons to his followers in the Pāli Canon respond to economic issues with teachings ranging from general approaches to poverty and wealth, to instructions for rulers to promote economic welfare broadly in society, to business advice for householders.

Following the Brāhmaṇic approach, Buddhist teachings do not condemn wealth; in the *Esukāri Sutta*, for example, the Buddha taught, "I do not say that one is better because one is of great

wealth, nor do I say that one is worse because one is of great wealth.”<sup>207</sup> Presumably, for the same reasons that the Buddha rejected the notion that the caste one is born into can make one noble, he also held that one’s wealth or poverty does not make one noble or ignoble. Therefore, to some degree, wealth and poverty are irrelevant to such concerns; what matters is how one behaves. Condemnation is reserved for attachment to wealth and for the misuse of it that results therefrom; praise is reserved for those who are generous and virtuous. We shall see in the following chapter on poverty, that material deprivation itself is condemned primarily on the grounds that it is a source of suffering and an obstacle to enlightenment for individuals. The laity is encouraged to accumulate wealth in a proper manner, which is to say in accordance with Buddhist principles, the most notable of which is Right Livelihood. The teachings on non-self (*anattā*), impermanence (*anicca*), the general unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*) of existence, and interdependent co-arising (*paṭicca-samuppāda*), which guide Buddhist thought and social ethics more broadly also establish the framework for economic ethics. In this way, individuals are part of a complex web of relationships, each related to and dependent upon other individuals, society collectively, and even nature; applied to the economic realm, Buddhist morality also demands that as economic agents individuals seek to relieve the suffering that they and others experience through economic activities.

The Buddha further praises those who have a propensity for increasing their wealth and creating new wealth as long as they also are not blind to moral considerations that inevitably accompany it, and they can clearly distinguish between good and bad, praiseworthy and blameworthy, etc.<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> MN 96: 7-8 (Ñāṇamoli, 1995: 787-788).

<sup>208</sup> AN 1:29 (Woodward, 1932: 111-112).

As we have already seen, the Buddha taught the householder Anāthapiṇḍika, for example, that property ownership, wealth and freedom from debt are all basic sources of satisfaction and bliss in life.<sup>209</sup> According to the Buddha, the bliss of wealth is to acquire wealth energetically and lawfully, but also to use it to do good deeds and for the enjoyment of oneself and others.<sup>210</sup> Wealth gained and used in this way is praised in the Pāli Canon. Condemnation is reserved for those who are idle or lazy, those who obtain their wealth in an unjust manner, those who waste their wealth, or those who are greedy and attached to it. In the *Gāmaṇisaṃyutta*, the Buddha gives advice to the laity on how to gain and use income. He praises those who obtain wealth lawfully, without violence, making themselves happy, and who share their wealth and use it for meritorious deeds without being attached to it or absorbed by it.<sup>211</sup> The manner in which wealth is distributed has direct bearing on poverty relief. Clearly, generosity toward those suffering from a lack of material needs will rank high as a priority if wealth is said to be used to generate happiness for oneself and others. The wealth is to be shared and used for meritorious deeds, and not to be held onto with greed, longing, or infatuation. Lay followers are to remain cognizant of these dangers associated with accumulating wealth, and retain a constant concern for their own liberation.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> AN 2:62 (Woodward, 1933: 77-78).

<sup>210</sup> AN 2:62 (Woodward, 1933: 77-78).

<sup>211</sup> SN 42 (Bodhi, 2000: 1332-1371).

<sup>212</sup> AN 5:91 (Woodward, 1936: 119-124).

### 3.2.1.1. The Concept of Happiness (*sukha*)

Just as the goal of Buddhist ethics or morality is to remove or reduce the suffering inflicted on oneself and others, economic activities are primarily intended to reduce or eliminate suffering (*dukkha*) and correspondingly to increase pleasure or happiness (*sukha*). This notion of happiness is fundamental to Buddhist economic thought and has found its way into popular discourse in mainstream economic analysis recently as well. As indicated earlier, the Buddhist concept of happiness refers to both sensual pleasures and the bliss accompanying higher meditative states. It is, therefore, understood in a comprehensive way which includes full human development. Apichai Puntasen notes the distinction commonly made in Buddhist thought between the forms of happiness: *kāmasukha* refers to the happiness or pleasures of a more sensual nature, while *nirāmisasukha* refers to the happiness resulting from virtuous actions such as those motivated by generosity and compassion, or through meditative practice, and *nibbāna-sukha* is reserved for the more elevated forms of bliss that result from more advanced mental development and attainment of the higher realms of existence as sources of *dukkha* are fully removed.<sup>213</sup> While all these forms of happiness are favorable, the Buddha indicated that sensual or temporal happiness is worth only a small fraction of the mental happiness arising from a wholesome and faultless moral life.<sup>214</sup> Nevertheless, temporal pleasure or happiness, such as that which results from wealth, is still worthy of pursuit, and in fact the good lay followers are said to deserve them. The *Anaṇa Sutta* indicates four types of happiness related to wealth for the laity: happiness from having wealth or accumulation, happiness from the use of wealth or

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<sup>213</sup> Puntasen, 2004: 41-43.

<sup>214</sup> AN 4: 62 (Nyanaponika, 1999: 99-100).

consumption, happiness from debtlessness, and the bliss of blamelessness.<sup>215</sup> The implication here is that the laity may rightfully pursue the happiness of owning property or material goods and of consuming them provided that happiness also entails the knowledge that they are free from debts and have obtained their wealth in a moral and legal way. A related passage from the *Dīghajānu Sutta* addresses the pursuit of the mundane and transcendent goals of happiness and well-being. An apt example of the balance between ‘this-worldly’ and ‘other-worldly’ teachings that are common in the Buddha’s message to the laity, here the Buddha teaches a group of lay followers the conditions that lead to well-being and happiness, along with material wealth, both in this life and in the life to come.<sup>216</sup> Well-being and happiness in this life are said to be brought about through persistent and skillful efforts, vigilance in protecting wealth, good friendship, and balanced livelihood; while well-being and happiness in the life to come results from faith in the Buddha’s enlightenment, virtue in keeping the basic Buddhist precepts, generosity, and wisdom.

### **3.2.1.2. Right Livelihood**

The importance of Right Livelihood to Buddhist economics cannot be overstated as it entails the most central and clear teachings of an explicitly economic nature. It is widely considered the foundation of Buddhist economics due to its centrality to Buddhist thought and practice as one of the eight factors in the Noble Eightfold Path and due to the specific teachings on moral or ethical duties concerning the production and accumulation of wealth that it outlines, as well as notions of distribution of wealth related to it. Even more importantly, because it is part of the Eightfold

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> AN 8: 54 (Nyanaponika, 1999: 221-223).

Path to enlightenment it forms a clear connection between the general soteriological goals of Buddhism, the cultivation of the mind, and the ethical and economic realms.<sup>217</sup>

Right Livelihood has generally been understood primarily as delineating appropriate professions, in opposition to those sources of livelihood that conflict with the basic Buddhist precepts, such as producing or selling meats, alcohol, illegal drugs or poisons, or prostitution.<sup>218</sup> These activities should be avoided as they are said to cause direct harm to other beings, and therefore, correspondingly, also to produce harmful or unfruitful karmic results for oneself.

### **3.2.1.3. Sufficiency**

In addition to these basic teachings on the proper accumulation of wealth entailed in the principle of Right Livelihood, the Pāli Canon also includes corollary teachings on the proper consumption and distribution of wealth. Wealth is said to be beneficial if it is sought ethically and without greed; if it is used for the good of family, friends, employees, the monastic *saṅgha*, and one's community.<sup>219</sup> One should not be stingy with wealth, but rather use it for the pleasure and benefit of oneself and others. Thus, it is ensured that one's views on wealth are consistent with Buddhist ethics and the fundamental principles and factors of the Eightfold Path generally and that it is seen primarily as a means of alleviating suffering and establishing the appropriate conditions for the cultivation of the mind.

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<sup>217</sup> SN 56: 11 (Bodhi, 2000: 1844).

<sup>218</sup> AN 8:25 (Nyanaponika, 1999: 207).

<sup>219</sup> AN 5:41 (Hare, 1934: 37-39); AN 10: 91 (Woodward, 1936: 119-124).

This concern for the proper level of consumption is referred to as sufficiency or what P.A. Payutto appropriately calls Right Consumption.<sup>220</sup> The path that the Buddha taught is known as the Middle Way, which the Buddha exemplified by rejecting the extremes of physical denial typified by austerities or mortification on the one side and the indulgences in sensual pleasures on the other. Applying the Middle Way to the economic realm suggests that moderation in consumption is a part of the Buddhist teaching in addition to using wealth for the well-being of oneself and others.<sup>221</sup> Right Consumption can be thought of as the minimum level of consumption necessary to promote optimal well-being and prevent the physical discomfort caused by the lack of the necessities for survival. Consumption beyond the level of necessity for optimal well-being no longer contributes significantly to further well-being, and, in fact, will likely detract from it. Furthermore, it results from attachment to or desire for sensual pleasures and is thus considered excessive. The obvious example here is the ideal of simplicity in the monastic *saṅgha*, which instructs that the Buddhist monks and nuns are only to own the most basic of personal material possessions required to sustain a comfortable level of existence without becoming entangled in attachments. So, wealth is intended primarily for producing physical well-being, social stability, and ultimately for the pursuit of nirvana, not merely to produce sensual pleasures; these goals are ultimately met by practicing the complementary principles of Right Livelihood and Right Consumption, which outline the Middle Way between extravagance and austerity and lead one away from attachment and the unwholesome states it brings.

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<sup>220</sup> Payutto, 1998: Chapter 3.

<sup>221</sup> MN 53 (Ñāṇamoli, 1995: 460-465). See also Daniels, 2011.

#### 3.2.1.4. Economic Advice for Pursuing Prosperity

In addition to the general principles of Right Livelihood and sufficiency that constitute an overall economic ethic, a number of passages in the Pāli Canon further specify particular economic principles for prosperity and for successful business endeavors and entrepreneurship. While the teachings on Right Livelihood can clearly be seen as fitting into the karmic framework as the means of generating sufficient fruitful karmic merit to secure a good future rebirth after this life, there are also passages that include clear principles indicating a path to prosperity in the accumulation of material wealth in the here and now.

In addition to the general guidelines given concerning utilizing one's wealth for the well-being of oneself and the larger community, the Buddha gave more specific guidelines about how business owners should save and invest much of their wealth.<sup>222</sup> According to these guidelines, wealth should be divided into four parts; one part should go toward costs of living and duties toward others; two parts are to be used to expand business; and, the final part is to be saved. These guidelines are doubtless meant as an ideal model for the more wealthy lay followers as it implies a large disposable income which very few likely enjoyed; it is assuredly at least as unlikely that many could live on less than a quarter of their total income then as it is today. Nevertheless, it is significant that we find here such a clear indication of the Buddha advocating that followers not only save for unforeseen circumstances, but also that they additionally make large investments of their total income in the expansion of their business.

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<sup>222</sup> DN 31 (Walshe, 1995: 461-469).

Additionally, the Buddha detailed the virtues of successful businessmen in the aforementioned *Dīghajānu Sutta*. These are four conditions leading to temporal happiness through carefully preserving and increasing prosperity.<sup>223</sup> The first is having skill, efficiency, earnestness, and persistent effort in one's profession. Thus, knowledge of a particular skill coupled with hard work is prerequisite for the creation of wealth. The second condition is the protection of one's wealth through attentiveness, particularly in reference to guarding against natural disasters such as fires or floods, as well as man-made adversity such as theft, the imposition of excessive taxes, and greedy or malevolent heirs. Third, associating with good friends establishes security and stability to protect one's wealth, but also involves encouragement in cultivating other Buddhist virtues and in keeping the precepts. Association with good friends is also a central teaching of the *Sigālaka Sutta*, which is one of the most important sources of social teachings for the laity.<sup>224</sup> The fourth condition indicated for increasing prosperity is balanced livelihood, which refers to striking a balance between income and expenses that is neither miserly nor extravagant; in short it is to exemplify the Middle Way through Right Livelihood and Right Consumption.

There is also another complementary list in the Pāli Canon of conditions for increasing prosperity in the *Sigālaka Sutta* which is contrasted with a list of conditions that lead to the destruction of amassed income.<sup>225</sup> The practical conditions that increase wealth include abstinence from debauchery, drunkenness and gambling, and, once again, having friendships

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<sup>223</sup> AN 8:54 (Nyanaponika, 1999: 221-223).

<sup>224</sup> DN 31 (Walshe, 1995: 461-469).

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

with good people. Conversely, the conditions that destroy one's wealth are the exact opposites: debauchery, drunkenness, gambling, and association with evil-doers.

### 3.2.1.5. Labor Relations

The importance of the complementary or reciprocal nature of relationships in Buddhist society was highlighted in the previous chapter. It should be mentioned here that among the six social relationships identified in the *Sigālaka Sutta* are guidelines for one relationship which has clear and direct bearing on labor economics and business management, namely the proper relationship between employers and employees.<sup>226</sup> Employers are told to arrange work for their employees according to their individual abilities; to supply them with food and wages, or what today would likely be called a living wage; to look after them when they become ill, likely referring to ensuring that basic health care needs are met; to share special delicacies with them, which seems to advocate the sharing of goods that for the workers would be luxuries beyond their own purchasing power; and, finally, setting reasonable and fair working hours. In short, employers are not to overwork their employees, and are to treat them with due respect and dignity; employers have a duty to provide beyond their mere livelihood and comfort to include enjoyment in consumption as well.

Correspondingly, employees are to reciprocate similar kindnesses toward their employers by working diligently, starting work before the employer and finishing after; by taking only what is given, or in other words dealing honestly and not stealing; by performing one's duties well; and, by praising and upholding or protecting the employer's good reputation.

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<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

Insofar as these teachings on maintaining proper relationships were intended to promote spiritual advancement, happiness, and wealth, the guidelines for employers and employees point to a general inter-relatedness between the good of the employer and the good of the employees. The well-being of the employees is identified as of chief importance among the other goals that would motivate one in business pursuits, such as generating profit or expanding reach.

### **3.2.1.6. Money-Lending and Interest**

An issue that often arises when discussing economics and religion is usury or the question of what should be considered an appropriate rate of interest to charge on loans to avoid the exploitation and oppression of those in need. Whereas some religions, most notably Islam, have held prohibitions against charging any level of interest, Buddhism seems to have found it acceptable, or at least tolerable, under certain circumstance since early times. Bailey and Mabbett indicate that this tolerance toward money-lending, debt, and interest may have been a part of the appeal for merchants and traders in early Buddhism who used these regularly as means to their increasing prosperity.<sup>227</sup> In fact, loaning money—even sometimes at high interest—later became a practice within some monasteries and temples fairly early in Buddhist history, after these Buddhist monastic institutions developed and spread beyond India into China and Japan.<sup>228</sup> In his history of interest, Sidney Homer notes that the first credit institutions in China seem to have been the Buddhist monastery pawnshops, as early as 200 C.E., which offered credit to the rich and poor alike against precious metals, produce, and various other goods which were stored in

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<sup>227</sup> Bailey, 2003: 17.

<sup>228</sup> Ornatowski, 1996: 212-217.

warehouses.<sup>229</sup> By contrast, Bailey and Mabbett note that Brāhmanical texts describe interest as polluting, and go even further in prescribing that money-lenders or usurers should be avoided. In early Buddhist texts, while debt is generally portrayed in a negative light as a burden and source of stress and suffering, and debtlessness is often praised, there is also an indication that taking out loans for business purposes may be a wise investment. The *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* notes:

Just as a man who had taken a loan to develop his business, and whose business had prospered, might pay off his old debts, and with what was left over could support a wife, might think: "Before this I developed my business by borrowing, but now it has prospered...", and he would rejoice and be glad about that.<sup>230</sup>

It would seem that taking on the burden of debts as an investment in one's business is here portrayed as not only acceptable but even wise. The practice of money-lending is not condemned in Buddhist texts, rather potential borrowers are instead advised to consider the inherent costs of indebtedness and avoid the burdens of debt, especially excessive debt.<sup>231</sup> Freedom from debt is described as a source of mental peace, relief, and happiness in life.<sup>232</sup> But, this does not convey the full weight of the Buddhist attitude towards the repayment of debts, which is so serious that it is a requirement of ordination in the monastic *saṅgha*.<sup>233</sup> In other words, in order to take the

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<sup>229</sup> Homer, 2005: 614.

<sup>230</sup> DN 2: 69 (Walshe, 1995:101).

<sup>231</sup> AN 6: 45 (Hare, 1934: 249-251).

<sup>232</sup> AN 4: 62 (Woodward, 1933: 77-78).

<sup>233</sup> Lamb, 2001: 159.

important step on the path to enlightenment of entering the monastic *saṅgha*, one must first have faithfully repaid one's debts, or at the least have a plan in place to do so upon entering.<sup>234</sup>

### 3.2.2. Lay and Monastic Economic Ethics

Buddhist economic ethics apply to both the laity and the monastic *saṅgha*, although there is a distinction made in how they apply. While the lay and monastic economic ethics are both oriented toward enlightenment through common principles of nonattachment to wealth, giving, and the avoidance of greed, there are some important differences between them and among different schools of Buddhism. The principles outlined in the Pāli Canon referred to above relate primarily to the behavior of the laity in the economic realm as the monastic *saṅgha* in early Buddhism was typically required to avoid work and to live largely without personal possessions, but instead to rely mainly on the generous donations from the laity for support—or at least this was the case with the early Śravakayāna schools in India, which included Theravāda Buddhism. However, this changed for many Mahāyāna *saṅghas* as Buddhism developed and spread to new regions, particularly China and Japan. Gregory Ornatowski describes the development of these variations as Buddhism spread to new regions.<sup>235</sup> According to Ornatowski, the absolute distinction between nirvana and *samsāra* eventually dissolved as the Mahāyāna doctrine of emptiness evolved, and the value of charitable activities within the realm of *samsāra* also increased accordingly and became more central to the *bodhisattva* ideal.<sup>236</sup> While, as we have seen, compassionate action was always a part of the path taught by the Buddha, it took on more

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<sup>234</sup> Schopen, 2004: 3.

<sup>235</sup> Ornatowski, 1996.

<sup>236</sup> Ornatowski, 1996: 212-213.

of a central focus in the teachings of the *bodhisattva* path; a supreme example of compassion for the suffering of others is said to be in becoming enlightened and yet choosing to remain in this world of *samsāra* in order to more effectively end the suffering of all other sentient beings. As altering one's perceptions of nirvana and *samsāra* to fully realize the teaching of emptiness became a chief Mahāyāna effort, economic activities that had customarily been discouraged or prohibited among the *saṅgha* also ultimately became more permissible.<sup>237</sup>

This altered perspective on the broader acceptance of worldly activities is often noted in the famous collection of Chan Buddhist ox herder images. The images prominently depict the stages along the way of the pursuit of enlightenment, and conclude with the enlightened *bodhisattva* figure returning from the disciplined stages of practice and the transcendence that follows in the advanced stages to the busy marketplace and giving of his abundance to the needy.<sup>238</sup>

10. *Entering the Marketplace with Open Hands*



Figure 2: Entering the Marketplace with Open Hands.<sup>239</sup>

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

<sup>238</sup> Sheng-yen, 2002.

This represents a clear divergence from the classic Śravakayāna images of nirvana as fully distinct from *samsāra*, and also of the more common portrayal of monks as the recipients of the donations from the lay followers.

As the *saṅgha* became well established after the time of the Buddha, the Buddhist monasteries in India and China became more involved in the activities of the community, even lending money and goods to the laity and charging interest.<sup>240</sup> Ornatowski summarizes the innovation that took place in China as the monastic centers began to engage in “various commercial activities ... such as grain milling, oil seed pressing, money lending, pawnshops, loans of grain to peasants (with interest), mutual financing associations, hotels and hostelries, and rental of temple lands to farmers in exchange for some percentage of the crop.”<sup>241</sup> Whereas early on in Buddhist history, monks in India and China were generally forbidden manual labor, Chan or Zen Buddhism in China and Japan for the most part came to accept monastic labor. Consequently, manual labor became for them a religious act that promoted social harmony as monks primarily provided for themselves through their own labor.<sup>242</sup> Thus, although there remains a consistency in the core principles of Right Livelihood, sufficiency, simplicity, and the inter-relatedness and interdependence of economic agents, we see a variety of innovations and the transformation of

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<sup>239</sup> Sheng-yen, 2002: 221. In this final image of the set, the *bodhisattva* is depicted as the smaller clothed man back in the bustle of the world, giving of his abundance to enlighten others.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid; Harvey, 2000: 204-206; Ch'en, 1973: 151-173. One of the reasons that some of the monasteries became wealthy and came to own large amounts of land was partially due to foreclosing on properties when loans were not repaid.

<sup>241</sup> Ornatowski, 1996: 216.

<sup>242</sup> Ornatowski, 1996: 220-224.

early Buddhist economic ethics as Buddhism further developed and spread to new regions where full enlightenment came to be seen as fundamentally compatible with the mundane requirements of daily life within the world.

### **3.3. Developing a Buddhist Economics**

Having dealt with the debate concerning Buddhist social ethics, and an outline of the key principles related to economic matters, I will now address the pursuit of a Buddhist economic theory as it has developed historically. The pursuit of an economic theory based on Buddhist teachings in scholarship only began about four decades ago, near the time that Buddhist ethics emerged as a distinct field of study in academia. From the beginning, much of Buddhist economics has largely developed as a critique of the dominant economic models and an attempt to develop an alternative to them that is based on the economic principles outlined in authoritative Buddhist texts. Juliana Essen notes that at a superficial level the Buddhist economic and the dominant Western economic models share common ground, both being fundamentally based on individual rational choices toward material wellbeing, but many conflicting differences also emerge upon closer examination of economic objectives, productive activities or work, and attitudes toward how to consume and disperse wealth.<sup>243</sup> I will outline here the approaches to Buddhist economics as represented by A.T. Ariyaratne, E.F. Schumacher, P.A. Payutto, Priyanut Piboolsravut, Apichai Puntasen, and the Santi Asoka group.

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<sup>243</sup> Essen, 2009: 32-33; Essen, 2010: 72.

### 3.3.1. A.T. Ariyaratne and *Sarvōdaya Śramadāna*

While discussions of Buddhist economics typically begin with E.F. Schumacher's groundbreaking introduction to Buddhist economics, arguably, Dr. A.T. Ariyaratne and *Sarvōdaya Śramadāna* is where this discussion of the development of a Buddhist economics should begin. It was after all founded in 1958, meaning it predates the other approaches to Buddhist economics that will be presented here. And, it is in many ways the ideal example of the sort of development movement promoted in Buddhist economics. I will give a brief outline of *Sarvōdaya Śramadāna* here as an introduction to the economic principles they exemplify and, in chapter 5, I will return to the topic of *Sarvōdaya*'s poverty relief efforts.

Working in more than 15,000 villages throughout Sri Lanka, *Sarvōdaya Śramadāna* is a grass-roots movement that focuses on self-help through community-led development projects based on what are considered traditional spiritual and social values.<sup>244</sup> The name *Sarvōdaya Śramadāna* means the 'sharing effort for the enlightenment of all' movement referring to the comprehensive combined personal and community development goals. In 1958, Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne began taking his High School students to live and work in a secluded poor village and began a project that would eventually spread across Sri Lanka to become Sri Lanka's largest non-governmental organization.<sup>245</sup> The goal of *Sarvōdaya Śramadāna* is to promote economic development in impoverished villages by relying on traditional spiritual and social values to involve all segments of a community in identifying, and actively working to address the needs of the village.<sup>246</sup> While

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<sup>244</sup> Harvey, 2000: 227.

<sup>245</sup> Macy, 1983: 13, 24; Harvey 2000: 227, and 2012: 380.

<sup>246</sup> Harvey, 2000: 227.

*Sarvodaya Śramadāna* is based on Buddhist principles, it is not strictly a Buddhist organization and also takes some of its inspiration from Gandhian principles. *Sarvodaya Śramadāna* accomplishes its goals by helping communities undertake the projects they deem needed in their own community, such as building roads, wells and canals, operating pre-school education, orphanages, and so forth.<sup>247</sup> Projects begin in each community as a volunteer enters the community and organizes regular meetings with community members to strengthen relationships and set goals about improvement projects that the members of the community feel are needed. The projects continue in the community beyond the development of the individuals in the community into outreach and volunteerism into neighboring communities. Thus the *Sarvodaya* approach is a participatory self-help approach that looks beyond the singular goal of increasing individual income to a far more comprehensive goal of transforming individuals and broader society into more ideal relationships and states that no longer succumb to the processes and conditions that lead to impoverishment and suffering.

Ariyaratne identifies Buddhist principles as the source of the *Sarvodaya* approach, saying, “The philosophy that influenced us most in evolving our *Sarvodaya* concept in Sri Lanka (Ceylon) was Lord Buddha’s teaching.”<sup>248</sup> He called for a revolution to build “a society whose value system is based on Truth, Non-violence, and Self-denial ... a no-poverty, no-affluence society.”<sup>249</sup> But, *Sarvodaya*’s vision for societal transformation is also based on Gandhian economic principles like a strong work ethic and local means of production that are not as clearly

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<sup>247</sup> Macy, 1983: 21; Harvey, 2000: 227.

<sup>248</sup> Bond, 2004: 11.

<sup>249</sup> Bond, 2004: 3

grounded in Buddhist teachings. This will be a problem that arises with E.F. Schumacher's description of Buddhist economics, which will be detailed below, but it is less of a problem for Ariyaratne because he did not claim to represent a Buddhist economics; indeed, the term does not seem to have been coined until several years after *Sarvōdaya* was founded. In fact, Ariyaratne openly attempted to make his model open to all other religions as well as to Buddhists; truth, non-violence, self-denial and moderation are Buddhist ideals, but not uniquely so.<sup>250</sup>

Nevertheless, *Sarvōdaya* has been criticized for its claims of basing its development organization on Buddhist principles and its efforts to re-entrench traditional values in society. Most notably, Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere have argued that *Sarvōdaya* essentially transforms the difficult 'other-worldly' demands of the Buddhist path into oversimplified 'this-worldly' activities; additionally, Ariyaratne's vision of the traditional culture in Sri Lanka's past is an idealized one that Gombrich and Obeyesekere argue has no grounding in history, but instead is a means of promoting bourgeois values from the middle- and upper-class leaders among the lower-classes.<sup>251</sup> Peter Harvey responds to these criticisms, arguing that "Sarvōdaya activity exists alongside an increase in 'demanding' meditative activity in Sri Lanka by both monks and laity, and Sarvōdaya has stimulated other types of demanding activity in many who were unlikely to have engaged in meditation (other than chanting)."<sup>252</sup> Moreover, Harvey responds, "while Ariyaratne's vision is certainly idealistic, he clearly recognizes the vices of

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<sup>250</sup> Harvey, 2000: 231.

<sup>251</sup> Gombrich, 1988: 243-255.

<sup>252</sup> Harvey, 2012: 381.

traditional village life and seeks to rectify these by drawing on neglected strengths that he, rightly or wrongly, sees as implicit in Sri Lankan village life. His glowing picture of certain ancient Sinhalese civilizations ...certainly contains exaggerations, and is thus best treated as an inspiring vision, yet his movement certainly seems to be producing good results.”<sup>253</sup> It is hard to argue that the *Sarvodaya* community development projects have not been helpful to many Sri Lankans, whether or not the idealized goals and inspirational models are grounded in historic facts. There is certainly nothing un-Buddhist about using metaphors and even fictional narratives to inspire benevolent and virtuous activity; this is, in fact, not an inaccurate way to describe one of the Buddha’s own common teaching methods.

Much of Ariyaratne’s critiques of economic models have been echoed in the later writers that will be covered immediately below. In accordance with the Buddhist notion of attachment leading to suffering, he notes that the key deficiency in Western economic models is that they depend on the creation of desire, while *Sarvodaya*’s explicit goal entails the elimination of craving or unskillful forms of desire and suffering.<sup>254</sup> In Ariyaratne’s view, in the free-market open economy the religious and spiritual heritage of Sri Lankan societies had been brushed away, opening space for the flourishing and inundation for competitive and possessive instincts.<sup>255</sup> This explains the impetus for a return to an idealistic state in which cultural values encouraged a general sociality and collective concern for others. *Sarvodaya* criticizes both capitalism and socialism for taking too narrow a focus concerning purely material economic activity; the fault with capitalism being the tendency toward consumerism, and the fault of

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<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

<sup>254</sup> Bond, 2004: 5

<sup>255</sup> Harvey, 2000: 230; Ariyaratne, 1995: 9.

socialism being that it takes a rigid top-down approach rather than a more participatory grass-roots approach.<sup>256</sup> *Sarvodaya* takes a more comprehensive and multidimensional view on development, considering several basic needs for full human welfare and fulfillment.<sup>257</sup> Basic income or consumption levels are not considered to accurately reflect the whole of human experience or well-being, which also must necessarily include cultivating virtuous character and healthy social relationships.

*Sarvodaya* stands as an ideal example of Buddhist economics in practice. While many of Ariyaratne's ideas predate the Buddhist economics movement, the development of Buddhist economics echoes many of the points he made in his local undertaking to transform Sri Lankan society. It exemplifies community self-help projects that are based on, and seek to re-entrench cultural and religious values as inspiration toward improvement efforts. Development Ethicist, Denis Goulet, summarized the lesson he learned from his time studying *Sarvodaya*:

The main lesson a development ethicist learns from Sarvodaya is that a cultural community can choose to create a new paradigm of development for itself by looking to its past traditions and finding therein the dynamic forces for producing social change. It can create modern institutions and behavior on its own terms and not as a passive, uncritical, mimetic assimilator of the paradigm promoted by industrially advanced nations.<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> Macy, 1983: 13-14, 45-46; Harvey, 2000: 230.

<sup>257</sup> Harvey 2012: 381.

<sup>258</sup> Goulet, 2006: 66-67.

In many ways, *Sarvodaya* was an early precursor to many growing movements in the broad field of development economics, such as the movements toward more comprehensive and multidimensional approaches to well-being as well as toward participatory approaches to economic development. It also represents a first step in modern times toward not only offering a critique of the effects on local communities of dominant economic systems, but also in re-embedding Buddhist principles in the market place on a large scale.

### 3.3.2. Santi Asoke

Santi Asoke is a contemporary communal reform movement in Thailand that stands as an interesting example of a Buddhist group that places a heightened focus on economic activities and the ethics that relate to them. Santi Asoke diverges from mainstream Thai Buddhism on several points: rejecting worship using Buddha images, following strict vegetarian diets, and emphasizing daily work as a form of meditation.<sup>259</sup> The group emerged in the 1970's when Samana Bodhirak denounced the Thai Saṅgha for immoral laxity and failing to sufficiently address the moral problems of Thai society. He started his own group with the goal of reviving Buddhism in Thailand.<sup>260</sup> Santi Asoke has approximately 10,000 members in nine communities in Thailand, with residents who follow the slogan, "Consume Little, Work Hard, and Give the Rest to Society."<sup>261</sup> Like *Sarvodaya Śramadāna*, Santi Asoke was also influenced by the Gandhian ideals of self-sufficiency and simple living and endeavors to cause a spiritual transformation in Thai society to counter what it sees as rampant materialism. Santi Asoke

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<sup>259</sup> Essen, 2010: 82.

<sup>260</sup> Essen 2004: 6.

<sup>261</sup> Harvey, 2012: 391; Essen, 2010: 83.

members run a wide variety of nonprofit and for-profit businesses for the benefit of society- such as providing free or cheap food, services, and education to the broader community.

A reduction in personal consumption is connected in Santi Asoke to social improvement as well as personal merit. By consuming less, they have more to give back to society, and do so in the hope of generating merit. Merit plays a central role in the movement as much of their practice has to do with living moral and simple lives as a means to generate merit. Formal meditative practices are not emphasized in Santi Asoke, so morality and merit take the highest level of concern. Mackenzie notes that according to Bodhirak, this belief in meritism as the path encourages people to be good, to do good and to help others, in doing so the people gain more merit. This is said to lead to a state of contentment and non-attachment to material wealth, a state of generosity, and a concern for the environment. This contented state is often directly contrasted with capitalism, which is perceived as tending toward leading people to attachment to riches, selfishness, and competitiveness as well as to polluting the environment.<sup>262</sup> These views lead Harvey to refer to Santi Asoke as anti-Capitalist and anti-consumerist in nature. Their criticisms of Capitalism largely refer to the inherent greed, consumption, competition and exploitation that becomes prevalent as a result of Capitalism.<sup>263</sup>

Departing from the more mainstream Buddhist view that personal possessions are not seen as presenting problems among the lay-followers, Santi Asoke holds that a simple and austere lifestyle is required for the lay-followers just as it is for monastics.<sup>264</sup> This contentment and

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<sup>262</sup> Mackenzie, 2007: 149.

<sup>263</sup> Harvey, 2012: 392.

<sup>264</sup> Harvey, 2012: 393.

simplicity is seen as the antithesis of Capitalism and as a spiritual purification process. By actively engaging in community improvement programs, Santi Asoke members feel they are generating the karmic merit that leads to greater happiness and a state of nirvana in this life; nirvana is seen in more mundane terms as a state of mind that is described as a lack of self-centeredness.<sup>265</sup> The generation of karmic merit as a path toward the attainment of a ‘this-worldly’ nirvana provides a strong motivation to teach their message to others, to give up time, energy and resources to the improvement of society.

Santi Asoke and *Sarvodaya* both represent Buddhist community movements that place economic concerns, a focus on Buddhism in the market place, at the forefront of practice. While *Sarvodaya* is more representative of a Buddhist non-governmental community development program, Santi Asoke falls more in the category of a new religious movement. Both are instructive of the role that Buddhism can play in regards to applying Buddhist principles to the market place, in addition to the varying perceptions of the centrality of economics in Buddhist thought and practice that we find in the Buddhist tradition.

### **3.3.3. E.F. Schumacher**

In 1973, E. F. Schumacher’s *Small Is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered* was published. *Small Is Beautiful* presents a humanistic critique and approach to economics, which included a chapter on Buddhist economics that ignited the initial interest in Buddhist economics among many Western scholars. Schumacher made a few initial points in his argument for

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<sup>265</sup> Mackenzie, 2007: 174.

Buddhist economics that were groundbreaking. A key point made by Schumacher that was rare at the time is that economic systems are not based on purely objective and empirically verifiable principles, but are in fact based on values and presuppositions that are in a sense culturally contingent; it may be wrong-headed, therefore, from the outset to try to base all economic policies and emerging systems in the developing world on modern Western economic thought, rather than on the values that are already part of a culture.<sup>266</sup>

The second key point is that Right Livelihood is central to the Buddhist path and the foundation of Buddhist economic ethics. “If there is such a thing as Right Livelihood in the Noble Eightfold path,” Schumacher reasoned, “there must be something like Buddhist economics.”<sup>267</sup>

Schumacher then outlined what he envisioned as a Buddhist approach to economics, which attempts to ground economic analysis in humanistic values, reclaiming the value of labor, and to shift the focus toward small and local production. A central point in Schumacher’s approach is the importance of human needs beyond those which fall merely into the realm of material needs; this serves as the basis for his critique of the modern Western economic systems. To counter what he sees as the destructive tendencies of the modern economic system, Schumacher proposes a notion of Buddhist economics, one based on the concept of Right Livelihood in particular, which he sees as a superior alternative for providing for human needs. “It is a question of finding the right path of development,” said Schumacher, “the Middle Way between materialist heedlessness and traditionalist immobility, in short, of finding Right Livelihood.”<sup>268</sup> Schumacher

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<sup>266</sup> Schumacher, 1973: 56.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid.

<sup>268</sup> Schumacher, 1973: 58.

provides an early economic model based on the notions of the Middle Way and Right Livelihood—at least in the forms that Schumacher understood them.

Schumacher’s ideal economic model includes references to some key Buddhist teachings on economic activities, noting that wealth is not in itself an obstacle to liberation, but rather it is craving for pleasurable things and attachment to them that prevents ultimate liberation. In Schumacher’s analysis, the main issue in Buddhist economics is “how to gain given ends through the minimum means,” thus his title *Small is Beautiful*.<sup>269</sup> He contends that the issue is largely one of consumption, obtaining the maximum well-being with the minimum of consumption. This also applies to production and labor as well; labor is reconceived as an activity that can provide meaning, and simple technologies that provide full employment and encourage a work ethic are considered the favorable means of production over more complex technology that eliminates the need for manual labor and also reduces the need for laborers. This Schumacher contrasts with modern Western economics which seeks primarily to maximize consumption using the optimal production. Also, in Schumacher’s view, because of the high value placed on self-sufficiency in Buddhism, local communities acting in accordance with Buddhist economic principles would strive to reduce their dependence on imports as much as possible, striving instead for full employment and maintain means of production and productive activity within their own community.

In contradistinction to the Weberian approach to Buddhism and economy, Schumacher clearly recognized, and drew the initial attention among mainstream economists, to the existence of

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<sup>269</sup> Schumacher, 1973: 55; Piboolsravut, 1997: 61-64.

explicit economic teachings in the Buddhist tradition and their potential for positive contributions to the broader field of economics. However, much of the ideal economic system he proposed is based more on his humanist ideal that “small is beautiful” than it does in Buddhist teachings. Rather than a wholly Buddhist approach to economy, what we find in Schumacher’s analysis is more of an exposition on how Buddhism can be read in light of a humanistic approach to economy.

Thomas Weber argues that Schumacher’s approach is based more on Gandhian principles of local production, consumption, and self-sufficiency than on Buddhist principles.<sup>270</sup> Though they may be beneficial in countering the perceived deficiencies with modern Western economics, these principles are not clearly founded in Buddhist scripture. While I have indicated, for example, that a concern over consumption and sufficiency is an important aspect of Buddhist economic ethics, it is not clear why Buddhist teachings should be considered opposed to trade, particularly when many of the Buddha’s early followers were themselves merchants and traders. Similarly, in reviewing Schumacher’s work, Stephen Batchelor points out that while Schumacher believed firmly in the need to rediscover spiritual values in economics, rather than basing this rediscovery primarily on Buddhist concepts, he based it more on Judeo-Christian values.<sup>271</sup> Batchelor notes that Schumacher’s larger framework is founded on a correspondence theory of truth developed by Aristotle and Aquinas, which understands truth as a correspondence between a thing to be known and the knower. This is based on a dualistic notion in which the mind is

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<sup>270</sup> Weber, 1999: 349- 361; 2004: 218-231.

<sup>271</sup> Batchelor, 1990: 178.

fundamentally distinct from the natural world.<sup>272</sup> Batchelor’s basic critique is that a Buddhist economics must be based on the non-dualistic principle of emptiness or *Suññatā* (Sanskrit: *Śūnyatā*):

Buddhist economics has to start from the premise of non-duality—recognizing that at root the distinction between agent, act, and object is merely conceptual. It is nothing but a grammatical convenience that has been tragically mistaken to represent three intrinsically separate entities or substances. In fact there are no things apart from the agents that act upon them, and no agents apart from the things upon which they act.... The truth upon which Buddhist economics would have to be based is not of correspondence, but of emptiness (*sunyata*). Prior to any correspondence, things and minds are grounded in the truth that they are empty of being separate, independent substances.

But, Schumacher was quite candid about this and acknowledges that his approach to Buddhist economics is intended to contrast a set of spiritual assumptions with the more materialist assumptions of the dominant economic systems. His choice to use Buddhism as the source of certain spiritual assumptions was, as he said “purely incidental; the teaching of Christianity, Islam or Judaism could have been used just as well as any other of the great Eastern traditions.”<sup>273</sup>

Schumacher began the conversation about Buddhist economics among Western scholars and made some important initial steps toward developing a Buddhist economics. He took the first big step in arguing for the propriety of developing economic models as much as possible, or as much

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<sup>272</sup> Batchelor, 1990: 179-180.

<sup>273</sup> Schumacher, 1973: 43.

as is effective in achieving desired goals, within the framework of established local values. He also pointed out key Buddhist principles that apply to economic analysis, including the centrality of economic ethics to the Buddhist path. While Schumacher's model is not a wholly Buddhist one, it did have a major influence on later thinkers and the development of a Buddhist economics.

More recently, approaches to Buddhist economics have come from within the Theravāda Buddhist tradition among Buddhist monk and lay scholars. I will outline here some of the major scholarly contributions to the emergence of a Buddhist economics since Schumacher, namely Payutto Bhikkhu, Priyanut Piboolsravut, and Apachai Puntasen.

### 3.3.4. Payutto Bhikkhu

Payutto Bhikkhu is a well-known and influential Theravādin monk scholar whose book *Buddhist Economics: A Middle Way for the Market Place* was a widely read exposition of how Buddhist principles apply in the economic realm.<sup>274</sup> While Payutto's *Buddhist Economics* was not widely read and influential among mainstream economists like Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful*, it has been extremely influential among other writers on Buddhist economics. Payutto's status as a monk-scholar within the Theravada Buddhist countries has given his book some measure of authority and has made it a foundational work that set the course for much of the later writings on the subject. A main concern for Payutto is the notion of objectivity in economic analysis. In his view, much like Schumacher's view, economics is a field based on human activity and

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<sup>274</sup> Payutto, 1998.

human values and should therefore be considered also fundamentally to be a matter of ethics.

Payutto's writings on Buddhist economics take on three main issues: first is the role of economics in Buddhist teachings; second, the limitations of contemporary economic theory; and third, the characteristics of a Buddhist economics.<sup>275</sup>

In his approach to contemporary economic theory, Piboolsravut identifies four main limitations to modern or neoclassical economics in Payutto's approach.<sup>276</sup> The first of the limitations he calls the specialization of knowledge, by which he means the tendency to isolate economic activity and treat it separately from all other areas of human activity.<sup>277</sup> Economics, he argues, should not be dissected from other branches of knowledge and experience, if we want an accurate perspective on human activity. If economic models are intended to accurately reflect, let alone in any way predict, human behavior, then they must include the full range of the activities and dimensions that make up human life. Payutto seems to have an interdisciplinary approach to economics here that will combine the learning from other fields that closely study human activities and behaviors, perhaps such as psychology, sociology, anthropology and even religion. Such an interdisciplinary approach would account for the inter-relatedness among different dimensions of human life, such as business and economy, family life, mental health and well-being, social activity, and so on.

The second limit he identifies is an issue of making value judgments, meaning that economics should not be treated as an objective and value-free field of study, but instead the significant

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<sup>275</sup> Payutto, 1998; Piboolsravut, 1997: 72.

<sup>276</sup> Piboolsravut, 1997: 74-75.

<sup>277</sup> Payutto, 1998: Chapter 1.

influence that ethics and value judgments have in the field should be recognized and accounted for.<sup>278</sup> While the field of economics has developed scientific and mathematical forms of inquiry that constitute the method of economic analysis, there is nevertheless a level of economic thought that has to do with prioritizing goods. This act of electing and prioritizing goods requires relatively subjective value judgments. Notions like well-being or happiness, and justice and equality, while virtually universally held, are nonetheless also notoriously difficult to clearly define and even more difficult to bring about through policy. What constitutes human well-being and how can it be brought about at a societal level? Does justice require some level of equality of goods and services for all or only of opportunity for all to attain them, for example? Should the focus of social policy be on improving the circumstances of the least well-off in society or of the majority? When dealing with normative issues, the ‘oughts’ of social and economic policy, moral values and ethical judgments are necessary. For Payutto, ignoring the deep-seated value judgments that lay beneath the veneer of objectivity in economic thought puts a serious limitation on accurately reflecting human activity.

The third limitation that Payutto notes is that economics should not be treated as a scientific inquiry in search of abstract knowledge. Its goal is not only to formulate ways of accounting for or predicting human activity and behavior or even merely to identify the problems facing humanity, but also to provide some indication of possible solutions; and again, this endeavor should require an interdisciplinary approach. Fourth, Payutto notes, economics lacks clarity concerning human nature. In his view, in regard to the notion of demand, modern economics is preoccupied with addressing quantity instead of quality. In other words, modern economics

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<sup>278</sup> Ibid.

seems more concerned with satiating an increasing desire for supply rather than questioning the value or morality of those desires. He notes that, while Buddhism and modern economics both agree that humankind has virtually unlimited wants or desires, Buddhism makes a distinction here between blind craving, called *tanhā*, and a desire for true well-being, called *chanda*.<sup>279</sup> Because modern economics too narrowly defines economic activities and misperceives human nature and the nature of desire, Payutto contends, there is a need for Buddhist economics.

He deals with the first issue by addressing the role of wealth in the Buddhist tradition. As I have indicated above, possessing wealth is neither a good nor an evil from a Buddhist perspective. How one possesses wealth, meaning whether one is attached to the wealth, stingy with the wealth, or obtains it through immoral means, is the moral issue at hand. Payutto notes that having great wealth and using it ethically is often highly praised.<sup>280</sup>

Payutto also outlined some key characteristics of a Buddhist economics that influenced virtually all other writers on the topic after him. He contends that a peaceful and stable society and an understanding of *Dhamma* are prerequisites for an ideal Buddhist economic system to exist in practice. Such a system, according to Payutto, would ensure that economic activities promote and enable people to be creative, fulfill their potential, and strive to be good and noble.<sup>281</sup> Consumption and wealth are economic tools, means to achieve the end of well-being and a good life in accordance with the Buddhist principles outlined above; consumption and wealth are not ends in themselves and the ends that are achieved through consumption and wealth should be of

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<sup>279</sup> Payutto, 1998: Chapter 2.

<sup>280</sup> Rājavaramuni, 1990: 40-41.

<sup>281</sup> Piboolsravut, 1997: 76-80.

highest concern. Economic principles in society are related to three interconnected factors: humans, nature, and society.<sup>282</sup> These factors are interdependent and influence one another. The well-being of each factor is necessary for the well-being of the others and, conversely, what is detrimental to one will inevitably detract from the others to some degree as well. This relates well to his social theory outlined in the previous chapter. Payutto further acknowledges two main principles of Buddhist economics, the Middle Way, in which he includes the principle of moderation in consumption, and the non-harm principle which relates to Right Livelihood; in short, he places high priority on the principles of Right Livelihood and Right Consumption as outlined above.<sup>283</sup>

Payutto identifies ignorance as the source of *dukkha* which manifests itself in various social problems. Lacking cultivated wisdom, people are enslaved by their cravings and limited in their experiences and their humanity. This further leads to a cycle of craving and ignorance in which the amassing of material wealth in attempts to satisfy selfish craving and desires in turn entrenches one deeper and deeper in ignorance. Alternatively, wisdom entails an understanding of the true nature of humans and reality which transforms these base cravings into motivation for the well-being of oneself and others. This, according to Payutto, allows economic activities to generate real value, as opposed to the artificial value, or merely the appearance of value, produced by craving, delusion, and the defilements.<sup>284</sup> Payutto clearly utilizes the Buddhist principle of interdependent co-arising in both his social theory and approach to Buddhist

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<sup>282</sup> Payutto, 1998: Chapter 4.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid.

<sup>284</sup> Payutto, 1998: Chapter 3.

economics. His identification of ignorance as the source of craving and suffering is fully in line with the general Buddhist world-view I outlined above. His perceptive application of key notions in Buddhist thought to the economic realm had a significant impact on the development of Buddhist economics and the issues he identified remain central to Buddhist critiques of economy today.

### 3.3.5. Priyanut Piboolsravut

Priyanut Piboolsravut also made important contributions to the development of a Buddhist economics through *An Outline of Buddhist Economics*.<sup>285</sup> While her general approach bears much in common with Payutto's, she is exceptionally well-versed in the field of economics and includes a high level of economic analysis that was unprecedented. Piboolsravut developed a Buddhist economic theory composed of two parts—a positive theory and a normative theory.<sup>286</sup> The positive theory is intended to demonstrate how things are, providing a framework for analyzing phenomena, while the normative theory is intended to indicate how things should be ideally.

She bases her positive theory on the three marks of existence that in Buddhist thought are said to be the fundamental nature of all phenomena in the *samsāric* realm—unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*), impermanence (*anicca*), and non-self (*anattā*). According to Piboolsravut's analysis, in economic activities, individuals seek to reduce their own *dukkha* while also trying not to inflict

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<sup>285</sup> Piboolsravut, 1997.

<sup>286</sup> Piboolsravut, 1997: 148-189; Puntasen, 2004: 15.

*dukkha* upon others.<sup>287</sup> This approach is clearly grounded in Buddhist thought and also highlights the ethical nature of economic activities. This positive theory is limited by the notion of *avijjā*, or ignorance; when individuals are a part of an interconnected whole, but lack perfect knowledge, meaning that they are unaware of certain conditions that effect other conditions or the whole, the need arises for a normative theory to establish peace and stability in the system.

Piboolsravut's theory includes complementary normative principles based on Buddhist teachings, such as the universal moral law of karma, and the cultivating of the virtues of giving (*dāna*), morality (*sīla*), and meditation (*bhāvanā*). Practicing these principles constitutes moral behavior, such as generosity and mental concentration, which allow for the development of wisdom (*paññā*) to in turn counter the ignorance that results in *dukkha*. Piboolsravut stands out in the development of Buddhist economics because she works in the field of economics and finance, providing her a specialized knowledge of the analytical tools of the field in addition to her understanding of the Buddhist doctrines that apply. The resulting economic analysis is far more in-depth and complex theory and system than previous attempts.

### 3.3.6. Apichai Puntasen

Apichai Puntasen is a Professor and Dean of Management Science, and author of *Buddhist Economics: Evolution, Theories and Its Application to Various Economic Subjects*, a comprehensive introduction to Buddhist economics.<sup>288</sup> Many works on Buddhist economics in the past, prior to Piboolsravut and Puntasen, tended to focus on discovering relevant Buddhist

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<sup>287</sup> Piboolsravut, 1997: 95-146; Puntasen, 2004: 15.

<sup>288</sup> Puntasen, 2004.

doctrines without clearly identifying their full relationship to specific economic principles, or on the other hand, they focused heavily on the economic analysis from a Western perspective with a more cursory treatment of the related Buddhist principles.<sup>289</sup> Much like Piboolsravut, Puntasen endeavors to synthesize the previous research and construct Buddhist economic principles on par with the systematic approaches of mainstream economics, and suggests possible contributions that Buddhist economic analysis can make to contemporary economic issues and discussions.

In a sense, Puntasen stands as the synthesis of decades of influential scholars and monks writing on Buddhist economics. Proponents of Buddhist economics from Ariyaratne and Schumacher tended to see the prevailing modern Western economic models as fundamentally deficient, typically pointing to destructive outcomes resulting from the narrow understandings of human nature that form their foundation and are subject to, and promote, unskillful or unwholesome states as a result. Apichai Puntasen also takes this course in his discussion of the emergence of Buddhist economics and expresses it more clearly and comprehensively:

As one looks at the history of the development of economic thought in the West, one sees that the part that is missing is an adequate model of the reality of human behavior. The use of mainstream economics' current model of homo economicus ... as a rational, perfectly informed and self-interested agent who desires wealth, avoids unnecessary labor, and has the ability to make judgments toward those ends, only generates alienation

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<sup>289</sup> Payutto Bhikkhu (1998), for example, redefines many mainstream economic terms to reflect Buddhist thinking, but does not attempt to develop a systematic model or approach to economics. Alternatively, Alexandrin (1993) takes a more systematic approach, but bases it largely on mainstream economics and deals with the related Buddhist principles more superficially.

and much harm for human beings. The use of the Buddhist Economic model of man where, ... each individual is part of the connected whole and each individual lacks perfect knowledge, allows Buddhist Economics the potential to be developed into a social science that can actually be used to serve humanity.<sup>290</sup>

In short, in Puntasen's view, the Western economic models are fundamentally deficient, primarily in their assumption that mankind is always driven by a self-interested greed in making decisions about attaining a superficial notion of well-being, decisions which are based on ignorant and faulty views of reality. Buddhist economics, on the other hand, stresses the interdependence and inter-connectedness of all beings which combats narrowly selfish desires; that the greed motive can be overcome; and, that a correct understanding of the true nature of reality is possible only as one progresses toward enlightenment by practicing the Eightfold Path. These inherent deficiencies in mainstream economics resulting from generally misguided assumptions about human nature and well-being are then to be countered by approaching economics from the perspective of a Buddhist understanding of human nature and of such comprehensive notions as suffering (*dukkha*), well-being (*sukha*), and the proper functioning of wealth within society (Right Livelihood).

Puntasen indicates that what he calls mainstream economics refers to a variety of modern approaches to economics; 'mainstream economics' is useful to Puntasen and other writers on Buddhist economics because it is a broad enough term to include any or all Western models such as Smithian, Keynesian or Marxist economics broadly as well as Eastern or Thai models like

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<sup>290</sup> Puntasen, 2004: 16.

Thaksinomics, the commonalities among which are set up as the antithesis of Buddhist economics.<sup>291</sup> Puntasen defines mainstream economics as:

A subject related to economic activities with the goal of an individual achieving **maximum utility** under the condition of resource constraint and for society to reach maximum welfare under the same condition.<sup>292</sup>

Puntasen contrasts this with Buddhist economics which he defines as:

A subject related to economic activities with the goal for both individuals and society to achieve **peace and tranquility** in a material world under the condition of resource constraint.<sup>293</sup>

Thus, in Puntasen's view, Buddhist economics is intended to focus on eliminating suffering in society, as opposed to achieving maximum material welfare, as he sees is the goal of mainstream economics. While peace and tranquility in society might also easily be construed in Western economic analysis as necessary to maximum utility for individuals, Puntasen uses this point as a wedge to highlight the tendency in mainstream Western economics toward individual material concerns over social or even spiritual concerns. It is expected in his analysis that the elimination of suffering for individuals and society will be accomplished by basing the approach to economic analysis and policy on broader and more comprehensive Buddhist notions.<sup>294</sup>

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<sup>291</sup> Puntasen, 2004: 10-11.

<sup>292</sup> Puntasen, 2004: 8. Bold lettering originally included by Puntasen.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid.

<sup>294</sup> For example, see Hettiarachchi, 1991: 1-98;

In a similar caricature of mainstream models, Laszlo Zsolnai closely follows Puntasen in describing the key difference between Buddhist economics and Western economics as between maximizing demand by cultivating desires and minimizing suffering by simplifying and reducing desire and greed.<sup>295</sup> He illustrates these key differences in this chart:

Modern Western Economics <i>versus</i> Buddhist Economics	
Modern Western Economics	Buddhist Economics
maximise profit	minimise suffering
maximise desires	minimise desires
maximise market	minimise violence
maximise instrumental use	minimise instrumental use
maximise self-interest	minimise self-interest
“bigger is better”	“small is beautiful”
“more is more”	“less is more”

Figure 3: Modern Western Economics versus Buddhist Economics.<sup>296</sup>

While Puntasen and other proponents of Buddhist economics are correct in some of the criticisms, pitting Buddhist economics against Western economics as if they are wholly alien and incompatible is an unfortunate oversimplification of legitimate issues and concerns. As Zadek noted, neither Buddhism nor Western economics is a monolithic approach.<sup>297</sup> Western economics has a long history covering more than two centuries of theorizing and debates which is presented as, and admittedly has some commonalities as, a historical tradition, and Buddhist economics also represents a history of different thinkers drawing on similar resources to formulate their own approaches to applying religious principles to an academic field that is at

<sup>295</sup> Zsolnai, 2007.

<sup>296</sup> Zsolnai, 2007: 152.

<sup>297</sup> Zadek, 1997.

times wholly unrelated to the topics of the texts. Comparisons between the different models is helpful and can point out potential weaknesses or limitations that should be of legitimate concern, but it also runs the risk of oversimplifying the positions to make targets of them, which likely does more to hinder constructive discussions than clarify them. Such portrayals are helpful in highlighting more subtle distinctions for consideration, but also ignore the fact that critiques of Western economic assumptions and global Capitalism broadly have also been occurring from economists within the Western traditions.

One need not look outside of Western mainstream economics to find criticisms of too narrow portrayals of human nature and activities in economic models.<sup>298</sup> The identification of problems with the notion of *Homo-Economicus* or ‘economic man’, for example, which stands as a key point of criticism of dominant economic models is not unique to Buddhist economics.

Rodriguez-Sickert, for example, by the same token identifies *Homo Economicus* as a prevalent approach to human behavior among economists today, and he also points out that it has serious limitations and weaknesses in its narrow scope.<sup>299</sup> And, not all of these critiques are recent, some of these issues had been discussed by Western economists for many years. In his history of the development of the notion of happiness and well-being in the history of mainstream economics, Ian Steedman notes that Alfred Marshall’s *Principles of Economics*, which was first published in 1890 and widely held as a foundational work in mainstream economics, contains nuanced discussions of the complexity of human motivations and the varying quality of desires, noting that rich and poor alike can find higher forms of happiness in such things as religion, character

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<sup>298</sup> For example, Rodriguez-Sickert, 2009; and, Lutz, 2009.

<sup>299</sup> Rodriguez-Sickert, 2009: 223.

development, and family than are found in mere material wealth.<sup>300</sup> Interestingly, Steedman notes that Marshall refers directly to the ‘Buddhist doctrine’ that ‘real riches consist not in the abundance of goods but in the paucity of wants’, remarking that ‘the only direct effect of an increase in wants is to make people more miserable than before.’<sup>301</sup> Moreover, many contemporary mainstream Western economists and business management scholars have also been looking to alternative models for re-embedding a moral or spiritual dimension that they perceive has been removed from mainstream economics; Buddhist economics has recently become one viable alternative among others<sup>302</sup> There is more common ground there than the simple caricature of a greedy and materialistic model on the one hand and a social and spiritual model on the other portrays. Puntasen’s own analysis includes far more complexity and nuance in his comparisons with alternative Western models than the general caricatures would suggest.

### 3.4. Buddhist Economics and Western Economics

The movement to develop Buddhist economics largely gained its foothold in Thailand, but has since spread to other Buddhist countries and has even become a topic of interest to Western economists who are not Buddhists, although it continues to center largely in Thailand and includes mostly Theravāda Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka. Interest among

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<sup>300</sup> Steedman, 2011: 24-28; Marshall, 1920.

<sup>301</sup> Steedman, 2011: 25; Marshall, 1920: 136, 690.

<sup>302</sup> See, for example, the numerous scholars contributing to collections on Buddhist economics and issues in business and management such as in Zsolnai, 2006 and 2010; also, see the *Society and Economy Journal*, volume 29 (2), which is dedicated to Buddhist economics.

Western economists in particular has once again increased in the past several years.<sup>303</sup> While Buddhist economics is often put up in opposition to its supposed antithesis, mainstream or dominant Western economics, it shares certain affinities with some Western alternative models and critiques of the dominant economic models. Attention is increasingly being paid to similarities between Deep Ecology, a radical form of environmentalism, and Humanistic economics which include notions of Happiness economy and Sufficiency economy. The following sections will briefly outline the fundamental nature of these approaches in order to expose the similarities and differences between them as a means to revealing the rich dialogue that can occur at the intersection. This will also provide a better understanding of Buddhist approaches to the notion of well-being which will prove particularly helpful for the discussion of Buddhist notions of poverty relief which will follow in the subsequent chapter.

### 3.4.1. Deep Ecology

Deep Ecology is a movement emerging from the field of environmental ethics that stresses the inherent value of all living beings regardless of their usefulness to human life. The term Deep Ecology was introduced by Arne Naess in 1973 with the aim of reforming the environmentalist movement by moving beyond the ‘shallow’ approaches of recycling and renewable energies toward a fundamental re-evaluation of the very role and place of human life on earth and an

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<sup>303</sup> Interest in Buddhist economics initially peaked in the mid-Nineties with numerous publications on the topic, most notably Payutto’s ground-breaking *Buddhist Economics- A Middle Way For the Market*. However, scholarship on the topic appears again to be on the rise, particularly as it relates to business and management.

acknowledgment of the intrinsic value of all living beings.<sup>304</sup> Deep Ecology rejects the notions of a human and nature duality and an ego-centered or narrowly self-interested model of the world, advancing instead holistic notions of an expanded self that identifies with all other living beings.<sup>305</sup>

A number of scholars have written on the many similarities and the high degree of compatibility between Buddhist thought and Deep Ecology.<sup>306</sup> Some of the core Buddhist principles, such as *ahiṃsā*, or non-violence, evince a clear concern for the well-being of other sentient beings. Furthermore, in as far as Buddhism promotes a vegetarian diet and discourages professions that cause direct harm to sentient beings—and perhaps even vegetation—it appears to be in line with the guiding principles of Deep Ecology. On a theoretical level, Deep Ecology and Buddhist economics both share a clear emphasis on the interdependence and inter-relatedness of humankind, other creatures in nature, and the environment. Some understand the principle of interdependent co-arising (*paṭicca-samuppāda*) as teaching that all phenomena are interdependent due to a delicate web of inter-relationships, a notion closely resembling Deep Ecology.<sup>307</sup> Additionally, Puntasen and Zsolnai note similarities in the interest among the approaches of Buddhist economics and Deep Ecology toward sustainability and the radical reduction of the burden of economic activity on the environment and other beings.<sup>308</sup>

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<sup>304</sup> Naess, 1973; Weber, 1999: 350-351.

<sup>305</sup> Parker, 2007: 70-71.

<sup>306</sup> See, for example, Barnhill, 2001; Zsolnai, 2006; Daniels, 2006; Macy, 1994; Maxwell, 2003; Khisty, 2006; and Henning, 2001.

<sup>307</sup> Zimmerman, 2006; Srivastava, 2008; Harvey, 2000: 152-154; and Keown, 2005: 40.

<sup>308</sup> Puntasen, 2005: 33; Zsolnai, 2006.

However, while some similarities between these two systems are readily apparent, on closer examination certain differences also become apparent and doubts arise concerning how compatible they may actually be. Certain key points cause difficulties if not incompatibility between these two approaches. While key features of Buddhist thought include notions of interdependence and inter-relatedness, nonviolence toward other beings, and an ideal of cooperation with nature rather than a subjugation of it, as Harvey notes, Buddhist thought places an obvious emphasis on the superiority of human life.<sup>309</sup> Keown further adds that as the ultimate goal in Buddhism is enlightenment, the natural world is given a secondary or instrumental value, not as a world that is to be restored to ecological balance, but rather as an imperfect *saṃsāric* realm that is ultimately to be escaped.<sup>310</sup> While an awareness of the interdependence of all phenomena, as well as the dissolution of dualistic forms of thinking, are also parts of progress on the path toward enlightenment, Keown notes that this does not entail one's self-identification with all other sentient beings and nature as it is understood in Deep Ecology.<sup>311</sup> Collete Sciberras proposes that Mahāyāna Buddhism may be more consistent with environmentalist perspectives, including Deep Ecology, than is Theravāda Buddhism because Mahāyāna Buddhism does not understand nirvana as wholly distinct from the natural world of *saṃsāra*.<sup>312</sup> Rather, the essential difference between nirvana and this unsatisfactory world of suffering is due primarily to one's mental development and perspective; as such, the natural world may have the opportunity to play

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<sup>309</sup> Harvey, 2000: 150-186.

<sup>310</sup> Keown, 2005: 50-51.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid.

<sup>312</sup> Sciberras, 2010. Nevertheless, Sciberras notes, there remains difficulty in reconciling environmentalist views, such as key principles of Deep Ecology, and the Mahāyāna notion of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) which entails a relinquishing of all views.

a greater role in Mahāyāna thought. Sciberras further suggests that Buddhist environmentalists may do well to convey their message to other Buddhists as an effort to protect the possibility of adaptation and evolution within an ecosystem, rather than to protect any static system or particular beings within it.

While there may be fewer similarities with Deep Ecology and Buddhist thought than first expected, some have noted that Deep Ecology shares affinity with some particular Socially Engaged Buddhist thought, such as that of Thich Nhat Hanh who also considers these two systems as fundamentally compatible.<sup>313</sup> Nhat Hanh advocates meditative practices that include an awareness of the interdependence of all sentient beings and the dissolution of dualistic thought that views humanity as outside of nature. In this sense, Socially Engaged Buddhist practices may take a step closer toward Deep Ecology, filling in the gaps where necessary in order to apply Buddhist thought to finding practical solutions to contemporary environmental crises. Additionally, such meditative practices may serve as valuable practice for Deep Ecologists who wish to deepen the experience of interdependence and such non-dualist thought.

### **3.4.2. Humanistic Economics**

Much like Buddhist economics, Humanistic economics is an alternative approach to dominant economics that emerged as a critique of the dominant capitalist models.<sup>314</sup> Although there have been numerous strands of humanism throughout history, they all tend to share a focus on reason,

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<sup>313</sup> See, for example Gregory, 2008; King, 2009: 118-136; Henning, 2001; Nhat Hanh, 1996.

<sup>314</sup> Jackson, 2008: 344.

ethics, and justice while upholding the primacy of human values and a common humanity. While humanism today is often equated with growing secularism and a rejection of religion, historically speaking, humanist thought has often overlapped with progressive religious thought. As Matt Cherry notes, no history of humanism can ever be fully separated from the progressive ideas of the various ‘more-or-less humanist’ religious thinkers such as the Buddha.<sup>315</sup>

### 3.4.2.1. Humanist Psychology

To a large extent, Humanist economics are based on principles of Humanist psychology as developed in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century. An in depth understanding of these principles is helpful in identifying similarities between the Humanist and Buddhist approaches to economics. The Humanist notion of human needs is also a comprehensive one that in addition to the basic physical requirements for survival and safety includes social and spiritual values as a part of its goal of human well-being and flourishing.<sup>316</sup> Abraham Maslow began the Humanistic tradition in modern psychology, developing a hierarchical model categorizing human needs that serves as an exceedingly valuable model for conceptualizing Buddhist thinking on the role and value of material needs as well. Maslow developed a hierarchy of needs in order to explain human motivation toward fulfillment in the sense of Aristotle’s *eudaimonia*.<sup>317</sup> Aristotle’s notion of

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<sup>315</sup> Cherry, 2009: 26-28.

<sup>316</sup> Human well-being and flourishing have also recently become popular concepts in Positive Psychology and Well-Being Theory, as described in Seligman, 2002 and 2011. These concepts are becoming common in contemporary economic discussions and have much in common with theories of well-being like Maslow’s influential theory.

<sup>317</sup> Maslow, 1987; Franklin, 2010: 28-42; Watson, 2008: 35-38.

*eudaimonia* or happiness is more than mere hedonistic pleasure, but instead refers to a full well-being or flourishing that is achieved through living well and attaining excellence and virtue, similar to the Buddhist notion of *sukha* at the more advanced levels.<sup>318</sup> To Maslow, this sort of fulfillment was to be achieved through meeting human needs, a category which includes clothing, shelter, and nourishment, as well as healthy social relationships and moral or what might be called spiritual development.

Maslow's hierarchy is founded on the notion that humans are naturally motivated to fulfill their potential or capabilities. As Maslow states it, 'what humans *can* be, they *must* be,' meaning humans are driven by a need to become all that they are capable of becoming.<sup>319</sup> Thus his hierarchy begins with basic physiological needs and progresses through social needs to the highest level of moral needs, or what Maslow called *self-actualization*.<sup>320</sup> While basic physiological and social needs, or *Deficiency-motives*, are most powerful and must be satisfied to some degree before it fully manifests, there is also a drive toward the *Meta-motives*, which refers to the need to fulfill human potential or actualization.<sup>321</sup> This hierarchy of needs is illustrated in the following chart:

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<sup>318</sup> Shields, 2007: 310-323.

<sup>319</sup> Maslow, 1987: 22.

<sup>320</sup> Maslow, 1987: 125-149; Jackson, 2008: 344-345. See also Marks, 2004: 322-323; Marks notes that Maslow's hierarchy has been reformulated by others, such as Max-Neef (1991), who retained the basic categories but rejected the hierarchical format and instead proposed an interconnecting system of needs.

<sup>321</sup> Franklin, 2010: 28.

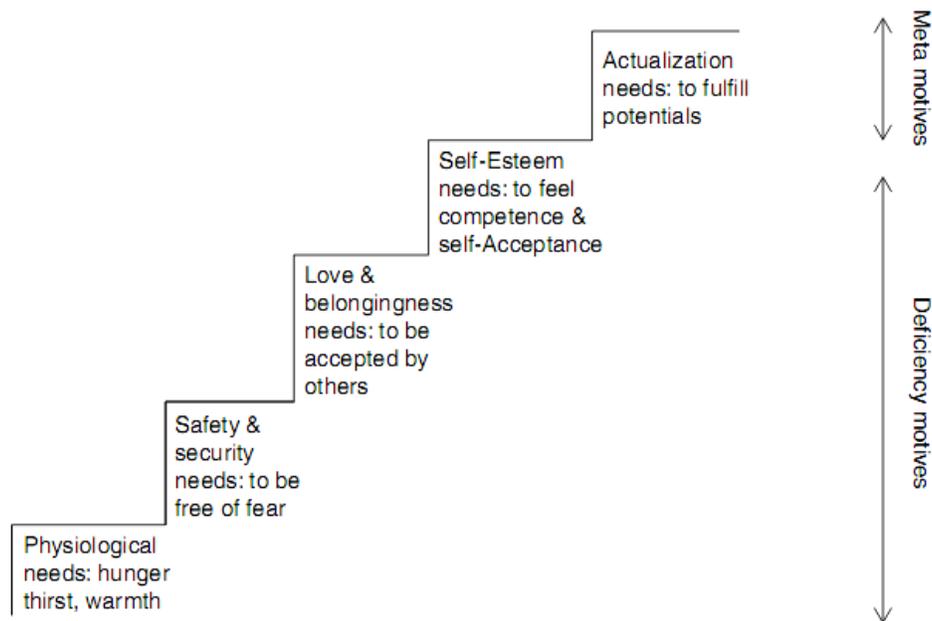


Figure 4: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.<sup>322</sup>

In Maslow's view then, the *Deficiency-motives* must be met at least to some degree before an individual is capable of focusing attention on the *Meta-motives*. A person who suffers from hunger pains, or is anxious about their safety, survival, or familial relationships, for example, is not immediately concerned with expressing their own creativity. However, as these more fundamental needs are met, individuals typically become more concerned with fulfillment rather than survival. Maslow described *self-actualized* individuals as exhibiting four key characteristics.<sup>323</sup> First, they have a more efficient or accurate view of reality, meaning that they are less inclined to distort reality out of fear or hope and are better at recognizing distortions or deception by others. Second, they are spontaneous and natural or genuine in their relationships

<sup>322</sup> Franklin, 2010: 29.

<sup>323</sup> Franklin, 2010: 32-35; Maslow, 1987: 128-149.

with others and in their confidence about themselves. Third, they are focused on benefiting others, liberated from their selves, rather than being egocentric. And, fourth, they tend to enjoy solitude and privacy, standing relatively detached from the anxiety and busyness of the social and material world around them.

### 3.4.2.2. Humanistic Economics and Buddhist Economics

Maslow's focus on the pursuit of self-actualization, particularly as it takes on this sense of self-transcendence in overcoming ego-centeredness, clearly has much in common with the characteristics and goals of the *arahats* and *bodhisattvas*. Indeed, Maslow's self-actualization model is a fairly helpful way for Westerners to conceptualize the development of the Buddhist ideal virtues because many of the characteristics of Maslow's self-actualized person resemble key Buddhist virtues, including Buddhist conceptions of wisdom and compassion, and the *brahmavihāras*, or sublime attitudes: lovingkindness (*mettā*, Sanskrit: *maitrī*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*, Sanskrit: *upekṣā*).<sup>324</sup> As in Maslow's model, these sublime attitudes are most often cultivated through, often solitary, practices of meditation.

There are also striking parallels between Maslow's conception of the relationship between material and social needs and spiritual development and Buddhist thought as expressed in a well-known narrative found in the *Dhammapada* which famously declares "hunger is the worst disease."<sup>325</sup> Despite the fact that the word *hunger* may also be taken to refer more generally to

<sup>324</sup> AN 4: 125 (Woodward, 1933: 132-133).

<sup>325</sup> Dhp 203 (Buddharakkhita, 2010).

desire or attachment, the role of physical hunger for nourishment has often been highlighted. The highly influential *Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā* highlights this perspective and elaborates the background story leading to the verse.<sup>326</sup> The hunger described in this narrative refers to a poor follower of the Buddha who suffered specifically from physical hunger which stood as an obstacle to spiritual development. The Buddha is said to have postponed beginning his sermon to a group of well-off listeners until after a poor peasant had arrived. Upon his belated arrival, the peasant was very hungry and tired. Instead of beginning the sermon so that the others would not have to wait any longer, the Buddha further postponed his sermon until after the peasant was fed with the alms-food collected for the attendant monks, and rested. As a result of this postponement and generosity, upon hearing the teachings of the Buddha, the peasant virtually immediately attained ‘stream entry’, the first crucial breakthrough toward enlightenment. When the monks later asked the Buddha why he had postponed his sermon until the man had eaten, and why he had fed the poor man from the food prepared for the monks *before* they had eaten, he responded that “there is no affliction like the affliction of hunger.”<sup>327</sup> Notwithstanding that the Buddha had ascertained that the man was generally in a proper condition to take in the *Dhamma*, his hungry state seems to have presented an obstacle to attaining ‘stream entry’. The Buddha is depicted explaining to the monks, “If I preach the Law to this man while he is suffering the pangs of hunger, he will not be able to comprehend it.”<sup>328</sup>

The notion that the Buddha’s poor follower had to be fed in order to then be prepared for the

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<sup>326</sup> DTK 15.5 (Burlingame, 1921b: 74-76); Strong, 2004: 75.

<sup>327</sup> DTK 15.5 (Burlingame, 1921b: 74-76).

<sup>328</sup> Ibid.

opportunity to attain enlightenment bears resemblance to Maslow's hierarchy. While actualization or enlightenment is the goal, one must have basic needs met first. This is a key message of the Middle Way approach as well. Additionally, as I have noted previously, the key lay Buddhist practices of generosity or giving to the *saṅgha*, as well as the general category of morality or ethics within the Eightfold Path, which must be practiced in relationships with others, have a social aspect to them that very much fits into Maslow's hierarchy as social needs. One clear Buddhist example of these principles in practice is *Sarvodaya Śramadāna*, which undertakes community development projects, aimed at improving the material circumstances in a community, through cooperative social action, and with the ultimate goal of 'the enlightenment of all'. *Sarvodaya Śramadāna* stands as a prime example of both a Buddhist and a humanist approach to economic development.

The parallels between the Humanistic tradition following Maslow and E.F. Schumacher's economic views has been noted by Mark Lutz, who points to Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful* as the first significant book on Humanistic economics.<sup>329</sup> As intimated above, there is a clear connection here in Schumacher's thinking on a more humanistic approach to economics than the dominant Western systems and Buddhist economics. While Buddhist economics is only one chapter in Schumacher's book, it is proposed as Schumacher's suggestion for achieving a more humanistic economics. Schumacher then seems to have been the first to posit the similarities between Humanistic economics and Buddhist economics.

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<sup>329</sup> Lutz, 1988: 2, 150, 313.

In fact, there are many significant similarities between Buddhist economics and Humanist economics. While Humanist economics may begin with the question of basic human needs, its focus does not stay solely on the most basic physical needs; these needs are meant to include and ultimately lead to human flourishing in the sense of Aristotle's *eudaimonia*. Much as has also been the case with Buddhist economic analysis described above, Tim Jackson points out that Humanist psychologists have argued that a basic misunderstanding of human nature has misled dominant Western economics in a drive for income growth above other goods.<sup>330</sup> Humanistic economics aims to improve the mainstream approach by basing it on a complete image of human nature that includes both the self-interested side as well as the collective-interested or cooperative side. Beyond the basic material needs for nutrition, housing, and clothing, any further drive for material accumulation and consumption only promotes harmful competition, creates unbalance and distracts from those things that offer meaning and purpose to life in the higher levels of fulfillment.<sup>331</sup> This approach to material needs bears significant similarities to the Buddhist approach outlined above as well, which also sees the basic necessities of life as good in so far as they prevent unnecessary suffering—such as hunger pains, illness, and anxiety—and as essential to the pursuit of further mental and spiritual development. This will become clearer in the following chapter on poverty which addresses directly the issue of the harm resulting from material deprivation.

While Puntasen identifies Humanistic economics as the Western economic model which bears the greatest similarities to Buddhist economics, he nonetheless argues that there are also

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<sup>330</sup> Jackson, 2008: 344.

<sup>331</sup> Ibid.

fundamental differences between Humanistic economics and Buddhist economics.<sup>332</sup> In Puntasen's analysis, Humanistic economics lacks a clear explanation of the "factors that will enhance the mental development of a person through the range of material needs to social needs and the moral needs of self-actualization."<sup>333</sup> In other words, although both economic theories identify similar deficiencies in mainstream economics, Buddhist economics goes noticeably further than Humanist economics in correcting these deficiencies insofar as it not only identifies the need for the return of human-centered values to the heart of economic analysis and policy, but it also identifies a clear path and highly developed practices to overcoming the problems of ignorance, greed and attachment that both economic theories identify as sources of suffering resulting from the mainstream economics approach.

### **3.4.2.3. The Happiness Approach**

While many Western economists historically had tended to assume that monetary measures were effective and sufficient indicators of well-being and happiness, since the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a growing number of economists and sociologists have also taken notice of the points made above by Humanistic psychology and have given careful consideration to the notions of well-being and happiness that it advances in their own disciplines.<sup>334</sup> In the field of economics, this has led to a reevaluation of the common models holding monetary measures as supreme

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<sup>332</sup> Puntasen, 2004: 22, 37-39.

<sup>333</sup> Puntasen, 2004: 37.

<sup>334</sup> Atherton, 2011: 3-14; see for example, Frey, 2002; Bruni, 2008; and Graham 2009. Research on the notion of well-being has also increased in profile among the broader field of psychology as in Kahneman, 1999, and Diener, 2009.

indicators of well-being, such as Gross National Production (GNP) or Gross Domestic Production (GDP), in favor of more comprehensive and multidimensional measures, such as the Subjective Well-Being Approach, which measures life-satisfaction and satisfaction in several domains of life, such as health, employment, family, friends, and so on.<sup>335</sup> As the notion of happiness became the subject of more serious evaluation, empirical data indicating objective as well as subjective indicators of happiness and well-being have also become more widely accepted, forcing a fundamental reevaluation of the purpose or goals of economic activities. The Easterlin Paradox famously indicates that while monetary gains are significant determinants of happiness and well-being at lower income levels, beyond a basic level of material needs, additional increases in income generate fewer and fewer increases in both subjective and objective measures of happiness.<sup>336</sup> Although income levels remain by and large the most commonly used key indicators of the well-being of individuals and nations, the idea that non-monetary conditions, such as freedoms, family and broader social relationships, or physical and mental health, play major roles is now gaining increased profile in mainstream economic analysis.<sup>337</sup> A growing number of countries, from Bhutan to Canada, France, Australia, and the UK, have undertaken programs to include more comprehensive measures in their State economic

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<sup>335</sup> Rojas, 2009. This approach will be discussed more fully in the following chapter on conceptions of poverty.

<sup>336</sup> Easterlin, 1974 and 2001; Scitovsky, 1976, reached a similar conclusion.

<sup>337</sup> For example, see the numerous contributions to Atherton, 2011; Oswald, 1997; Easterlin, 2002; and, Layard, 2005.

analyses, considering happiness or well-being as an ultimate goal rather than simply economic growth.<sup>338</sup>

In 1972, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the King of the Buddhist Nation of Bhutan first proposed the concept of Gross National Happiness as a commitment to aligning economic goals with the Buddhist values of his country. Over the last few decades, Bhutan has worked to develop the capabilities to measure the general well-being of their population, by measuring diverse indicators such as health, education, psychological well-being, how time is spent, as well as income.<sup>339</sup> As the only country in the world currently using Gross National Happiness as its mechanism for economic analyses, Bhutan is leading the way in happiness-based public policy making, although it continues to garner growing interest among development agencies and economists.<sup>340</sup>

### 3.5. Political Economy

A question that naturally arises concerning economics is ‘what is the proper form of political economy according to Buddhist thought?’ The answer, however, is not a simple one. Ian Harris notes that from an early period Buddhism showed a marked preference for monarchical forms of governance.<sup>341</sup> However, he continues, “it would be wrong to conclude that kingship is the only form of governance authorized by the textual tradition and Buddhists in many regions of Asia

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<sup>338</sup> Krueger, 2009: 1.

<sup>339</sup> Bates, 2009; Tideman, 2011; Thimley, 2005; Ura, 2004; and Priesner, 2004.

<sup>340</sup> See for example, Krueger, 2009.

<sup>341</sup> Harris, 2007: 3.

have been able to flourish without a kingly protector. Indeed, the Buddha's own utterances also seem to give support to the idea of republican or socialist systems of political organization".<sup>342</sup> In the twentieth century, Socialist models gained favor in modern Buddhist countries throughout Southeast Asia, no doubt due in part to the notion that the forsaking of personal property exemplified by the *saṅgha* should serve as a model for the rest of society. Yet, Southeast Asian economies have seen significant growth over the last couple of decades in connection with free-market Capitalist principles. Rejecting both Communism and Capitalism on the grounds that they foster greed and attachment, Buddhadhāsa Bhikkhu taught that the economic teachings found in the Pāli Canon clearly imply a form of Socialism, which he called 'Dictatorial Dhammic Socialism'.<sup>343</sup> He taught that a Socialist system, modeling the *saṅgha*, would be concerned principally with collective well-being. Such a system, led by a ruler who is guided by the principles of the *Dhamma*, would counter the greed, hatred and delusion that lead to all social ills.<sup>344</sup>

Swearer notes that the notion of Buddhist Socialism is based on the idea that the state is to ensure that its people have the four requisites, much like the *saṅgha*—food, shelter, clothing, and medicine.<sup>345</sup> Sarkisyanz and Swearer both argue that the ideal Buddhist state would be both socialistic and democratic, following the model of the *saṅgha* which largely uses majority vote in decision-making.<sup>346</sup> On the other hand, Schmidt-Leukel points out that the dictatorial aspect

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<sup>342</sup> Harris, 1999: 19.

<sup>343</sup> Swearer, 1989: 182-193; Schmidt-Leukel 2006b: 90-91.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid.

<sup>345</sup> Swearer, 1986.

<sup>346</sup> Swearer, 1970: 66-67; Sarkisyanz, 1965: 21-23.

necessary for Buddhādāsa's system stands in direct opposition to principles of liberal democracy insofar as it is doubtful that it could be implemented society-wide without severe coercion.<sup>347</sup>

Harris notes that the complex relationships between Buddhist religion and politics vary among Buddhist countries throughout history and cautions against simplistic generalizations about how they affect one another:

We should be careful not to conflate the disparate and historically distinct cultures and political systems of Asia, particularly when their only common feature may be shared commitment to Buddhism, and glib generalizations about the precise relation between religious and political spheres in Buddhist cultures are best avoided.<sup>348</sup>

While Buddhism seems closely aligned with certain notions of collective well-being and state provision of basic material necessities, Buddhist teachings do not necessarily proclaim any one system as the appropriate one. In other words, Buddhist teachings are consistent with a variety of political and economic perspectives and have been used to legitimate the authority of a variety of political systems.

For our purposes here, the question of political economy revolves around the more pointed question of what role the government should play in alleviating poverty, a question that will be addressed more fully in the following chapter. The notion of Right Livelihood strongly implies that economic activities that might directly cause death or suffering to other living beings should be avoided. But beyond this general concern, should welfare programs be put in place to give

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<sup>347</sup> Schmidt-Leukel 2006: 91-93.

<sup>348</sup> Harris, 1999: 1-2.

directly to those suffering in poverty, or should these economic goods primarily be accomplished through free market incentives and private charity? Robert Thurman has argued that the services and goods listed in the *Rājaparīkathā-ratnamālā* by Nāgārjuna imply a welfare state, which he calls Compassionate Socialism.<sup>349</sup> Similarly, Sarkisyanz includes the welfare state as an essential aspect of an ideal Buddhist State.<sup>350</sup> The passages concerning the proper role of the government or rulers in providing for the needy I outline in the following chapter will make it clear that direct action by the rulers through targeted giving is clearly and repeatedly acknowledged as a primary duty of the rulers. In light of the various passages in Buddhist scripture that contain admonishments directly to the political rulers, it would be extremely difficult to make the case that an ideal Buddhist state would not have some important role to play in providing basic necessities to those suffering in poverty. The poor are to be a priority when taxes and other policies are considered, but giving material goods needed for sustenance as well as investment in new business undertakings are also identified as appropriate modes of poverty relief. But, having acknowledged the central role that the government is to play, it is also important to recognize the role that private organizations, individuals, and the poor themselves are to play. These will be covered in detail below. Suffice it to say that principles outlined in the Pāli Canon indicate that rulers are to provide for the needy, through what appears to be some form of government welfare or assistance programs, but a comprehensive approach is required that includes cooperative efforts among all major sectors of society. Beyond a mere concern for those within one's own borders, this applies to the realm of international relations as well. Harvey notes that the highly influential model of Buddhist kingship, King Ashoka is said to have set the example of providing

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<sup>349</sup> Thurman, 1996: 87-88; Harvey, 2000: 198-199.

<sup>350</sup> Sarkisyanz, 1965: 21-27.

aid to neighboring kingdoms.<sup>351</sup> The eminent Mahāyāna scholar Nāgārjuna also advised King Udayi not only to be concerned about the safety and protection of property of those outside of his own kingdom, but also to provide material support, such as food and drink, to them.<sup>352</sup>

### 3.6. Conclusion

Buddhist economics emerged in the late twentieth Century in Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka largely as a critique of, and response to, mainstream Western economies. While these critiques often follow the thinking of some similar Western critiques in highlighting the deficiencies in the basic assumptions of the nature of ‘economic man’ and in the need to return ethics to economic analysis, Buddhist economics offers its own unique responses to these critiques as well in providing a larger worldview within which to fit a more ethical and multidimensional approach to economics as well as outlining motivations for moral behavior and practices to cultivate such a character. If, as Fullbrook has suggested the trend is moving, and the field of economics does in fact become more welcoming of heterodox approaches, more open to the notions that economic values are culturally derived and that different systems of thought can contribute to a more comprehensive approach to economic issues, then Buddhist economics will likely continue to garner increasing interest among economists as its contributions to the field become more apparent.<sup>353</sup>

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<sup>351</sup> Harvey, 2000: 116.

<sup>352</sup> RR 4:320-321 (Hopkins, 1987: 159).

<sup>353</sup> Fullbrook, 2008: 1-12.

Buddhist economics is based largely on the principle of Right Livelihood, which is generally understood as concerned primarily with whether income is generated in an ethical manner that causes no direct harm to other living beings. Buddhist economics also relies on the additional teaching that income is to be used to provide for the needs as well as the enjoyment of oneself, family, friends, and community. It follows Buddhist thinking in identifying suffering as the key concern of ethical and economic activities; suffering is reduced and eliminated primarily, not by consumption, growth, or production, but rather by removing attachment, aversion, greed, and ignorance. Happiness or well-being is a key target and purpose of economic activity and this well-being is understood in a broad and comprehensive manner which includes material as well as social and spiritual fulfillment.

Buddhist economics requires much further study and development in order to become a well-established area within the field of economics. As Zadek and Puntasen suggest, it is still missing a clear application to specific economic issues and subjects, such as international trade, public finance, and monetary economics.<sup>354</sup> Much of this work will necessarily be carried out by scholars fluent in the languages of these particular areas as well as Buddhist economic thought. While the general principles of Buddhist economic thought outlined above will not likely produce a single approach to each of these specialized topics, the general questions raised by Buddhist economic theories will certainly generate fresh and valuable insights and further questions. Despite these gaps in the application of Buddhist economic theory, it nevertheless can make significant contributions to mainstream economic thought, primarily by way of a more enriched approach to human nature, well-being, and the goal of economic activity than is offered

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<sup>354</sup> Zadek, 1997, Puntasen, 2004: 146.

through the assumptions of human nature and behavior suggested by the *homo oeconomicus* approach.

A clear contribution from Buddhist economics is the return of moral or ethical value to the realm of economics. This was an initial point of interest to Schumacher and has continued to be of interest to many economists today. Especially as a result of the recent global economic decline, it has become clear to many that unchecked greed and continuous growth and consumption at seemingly any cost ultimately result in the suffering of many, and most particularly of the world's poor. Buddhist economics not only offer a systematic critique of the sources of greed, attachment and suffering, but also proposes a full and systematic path intended to transform them into compassion, equanimity and wisdom. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, because it is grounded firmly in the Buddhist tradition, Buddhist economics not only offers principles for a more compassionate and generous approach, but it also offers strong motivation to follow those principles and so behave morally in economic affairs—a strong motivation to a sizeable portion of the world's population.

The emphasis in Buddhist economics on pursuing happiness and pleasure that places greater value on mental if not spiritual development, and on healthy social relationships, than on material acquisition, shares common ground with current economic thought, as well as on human development and poverty alleviation, namely notions of social capital and the Capabilities Approach; this will be discussed further in the following chapter on Buddhist approaches to poverty and poverty relief.

## 4. Buddhist Concepts of Poverty

An estimated 2.6 billion people currently live in poverty; of those, it is estimated that some 18 million die each year from starvation or preventable poverty-related diseases—10 million of whom are children under the age of five.<sup>355</sup> Tragically, in spite of targeted poverty alleviation efforts over the past few decades by local and international bodies, both public and private, poverty seems to have only increased—most shockingly, even in many of the targeted areas.<sup>356</sup> Global poverty has perhaps never been more of a concern of so many people around the world as it is today in this age of globalization. In spite of the facts that virtually everyone is familiar with poverty to some degree and that there is a wide consensus that it is a growing major global concern, even the task of articulating a definition of poverty has proven difficult, rendering a proper approach to its alleviation even more difficult to envision.

Although the notion of suffering is widely recognized as the primary preoccupation in Buddhist thought, it is still often erroneously assumed that the Buddhist approach to poverty is essentially to realize that impoverishment is the result of one's karmic merit and that such a state should simply be dispassionately accepted. Having reviewed key approaches to Buddhist social and economic ethics in the previous chapters, here I more closely examine the particular teachings on conceptions of poverty and their correspondence to the current academic approaches to poverty commonly in use. However, despite the interest in world poverty as an issue of contemporary ethics, and the clear relevance of these topics to the increasingly popular discussions of

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<sup>355</sup> Chen and Ravallion, 2008: 20-21; Singer, 2009: 4-9.

<sup>356</sup> Odekon, 2006: viii.

globalization and social justice, surprisingly little has been written concerning the forms of suffering resulting from material poverty and the appropriate Buddhist approach to relieve this poverty. This dissertation and more particularly this chapter is intended to correct that, demonstrating that Buddhist teachings on poverty overlap in important ways with current thinking on poverty and poverty relief, and that these teachings can in fact make important contributions to ongoing discussions concerning global poverty. As Ter Haar noted above, religion can provide important resources to the development community.<sup>357</sup> In addition to the social capital provided through the established relationships, organizational structures, and material resources available within a religious community, religion can also provide the philosophical or theological teachings that can support development goals and inspire and motivate such activities within a community. Buddhism offers just such a social ordering and a theoretical framework for effectively conceptualizing the problem of poverty, a conception of poverty that also implicitly includes a strong moral obligation to alleviate poverty.

In this chapter, I will briefly outline common general categories of approaches to conceptualizing poverty. Once these conceptual models for describing poverty are established, I will proceed to present the notions of poverty that are described in Buddhist scriptures, beginning with the Pāli Canon and continuing on with various Mahāyāna sūtras that exemplify the Buddhist approach to poverty. While, as might be expected, there is no one unified approach to conceptualizing poverty, these texts will provide examples of what might be considered as genuinely Buddhist conceptions of poverty. Having outlined the notions of poverty found in Buddhist texts, I will draw comparisons to the general categories of approaches to poverty in order to identify the

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<sup>357</sup> Ter Haar, 2011: 8-9.

contribution that the Buddhist tradition can make to the discussion of global poverty and poverty alleviation today. This chapter addresses definitions of poverty and will be followed directly by a similar chapter focused on notions of poverty relief and examples of contemporary Buddhist poverty relief programs.

## **4.1. Defining Poverty**

A basic problem that arises when discussing poverty is that any definition of poverty one may propose will inevitably also set limits on the entire discussion, often narrowing its scope. This is primarily because it will necessarily entail judgments about poverty, though these are frequently unnoticed and unintended; these typically include unstated implications about what causes poverty, what are its effects, and what should be done about it. A clear definition of poverty must, therefore, address a wide range of questions, perhaps most significantly: is poverty simply a lack of the basic material needs for survival or does it include access to such resources as education, healthcare, and a safe and secure environment? What indicators effectively signify impoverishment, and how do we clearly distinguish between the poor and non-poor? Who or what is largely responsible for causing poverty? And, can poverty most effectively be alleviated on the level of individuals, families, or nations? Every individual, community, or organization that attempts to alleviate poverty must make similar judgments as they determine how to recognize and measure poverty to identify the target groups and assess the impact of their strategies. Historian of world poverty, Steven Beaudoin, notes that scholars have tended to use one of three broad categories of approaches in defining and measuring poverty—Absolute

Poverty, Relative Poverty, and a Capabilities Approach to poverty.<sup>358</sup> Beaudoin's categories are helpful because they effectively account for all the major approaches that have been taken in the past to define poverty; virtually all approaches to poverty fall into one of these simple categories.<sup>359</sup> Moreover, they are also helpful for establishing the language and concepts for discussing the issue.

#### 4.1.1. Absolute Poverty

The most basic approach to defining poverty, and certainly the most common historically, is to define it in monetary terms measured against a fixed standard; that is, to measure poverty by determining a minimum level of consumption or income for basic subsistence to serve as a standard.<sup>360</sup> Individuals, although typically households are measured, falling below this level are considered to be in absolute poverty or destitution. This approach is based on the assumption that

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<sup>358</sup> Beaudoin, 2007: 1-14.

<sup>359</sup> Laderchi, 2003, alternatively describes four categories in summarizing the major approaches: the Monetary Approach, the Capabilities Approach, Social Exclusion, and Participatory Approaches. These approaches are similar to those used by Beaudoin. I rely on Beaudoin's approach because it is a simpler model, and because its categories more readily account for the Buddhist notions. Laderchi's monetary approach attempts to set a universal standard based on monetary measures of income or consumption. The Capabilities Approach focuses on the freedoms or capabilities to pursue desired ends. Social Exclusion tends to focus on the ability to perform or function normally in society. The Participatory Approach attempts to include the perspectives of the poor in defining and measuring poverty. The latter categories are included in Beaudoin's final category.

<sup>360</sup> Laderchi, 2003: 6.

a universal monetary measure or formula can be devised to uniformly account for the various impoverished circumstances of individuals regardless of their particular location in time and space. To accomplish this, such approaches are typically based on the cost of providing proper nutrition or caloric intake.<sup>361</sup> Thus, those who have an income, for example, that is below the level needed to provide the basic requirements to sustain life, are considered to be below the ‘poverty level’. In what many consider the first scientific study of poverty, in the late nineteenth century, British sociological researcher Seebohm Rowntree used this approach by estimating the monetary requirements for nutrition, clothing, and shelter.<sup>362</sup> With some modern variation and improvements to account for modern life, this approach is still widely used today.<sup>363</sup> In 1963, for example, the US government began its use of the Orshansky scale to establish the poverty level, which, similar to Rowntree’s approach, estimates the minimum expenses necessary for proper nutrition and then augments this with the costs of other necessary or vital expenses.<sup>364</sup> The current extreme poverty level established by the World Bank is set at living on \$1.25 a day; moderate poverty is defined as living on less than \$2 a day.<sup>365</sup> By this measure, an estimated 1.4 billion people live in extreme poverty, and an additional 1.2 billion in moderate poverty.<sup>366</sup>

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<sup>361</sup> Laderchi, 2003. Laderchi refers to Deaton, 1997, for an example of arguments in favor of a consumption-based approach, and to Atkinson, 1989, for an income-based argument.

<sup>362</sup> Rowntree 1902; See also Laderchi 2003: 8.

<sup>363</sup> Laderchi, 2003: 8; Laderchi maintains that the modern approaches, such as Grosh, 2000, still tend to rely on many key elements pioneered much earlier by Rowntree.

<sup>364</sup> Beaudoin, 2007: 4.

<sup>365</sup> World Bank, 2003.

<sup>366</sup> Based on 2005 data, Chen and Ravallion, 2008. Because the cost of living varies from country to country, and any set amount of money could therefore purchase more in

While the simplicity of this approach makes it a desirable working model for agencies and organizations that are focused on active engagement in alleviating poverty rather than merely studying it, it also has its shortcomings.

Many consider the problems associated with the absolute poverty perspective to outweigh its usefulness. As Beaudoin points out, this approach is an oversimplification of extremely complex phenomena. It tends to gloss over important variables like the seasonal fluctuations in food supply and cost, cultural dictates on consumption and food preparation, and the connections between impoverishment and stages in the life-cycle.<sup>367</sup> Households of different sizes and compositions, for example, may fair very differently economically, if one family is comprised of all healthy and employable members, or alternatively, if one is comprised of small children, elderly, or disabled members that contribute little, if any income, while also requiring additional expenditures on care. Moreover, it makes it difficult to take into consideration public goods that are not part of private budgets, although they are essential to survival, such as clean water, utilities, and sanitation. In short, individuals and families living in areas with clean water and sanitation are less likely to suffer from debilitating diseases that are often associated with extreme poverty than those living in areas without these basic utilities, and yet these public goods and other variances are not factored into the analysis.

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some countries than others, a purchasing power parity exchange rate is used to determine the real exchange rate for international comparisons. Thus, to be precise, the poverty level is technically set at \$1.25 PPP (2005 Purchasing Power Parity dollars).

<sup>367</sup> Beaudoin, 2007: 4.

### 4.1.2. Relative Poverty

The second approach is to define poverty in relation to the living standards within a community or nation, and therefore, it focuses more on income inequality on average rather than on individual income.<sup>368</sup> This approach considers impoverishment in terms of the disposable income of an individual in relation to the benchmark of the average overall wealth and living standards of the broader population. Here then, poverty is defined in terms of individual or family income as compared to average income in the area widely. Beaudoin indicates that the major measure employed with this approach continues to be income, although researchers also often consider the availability of certain public goods, such as statistics on sanitation, medical facilities, and housing. The general formula here is if a family falls below a certain percentage of the average income of other citizens of the country or region, then they are considered below the ‘poverty level’. The World Bank uses this approach to some extent by adjusting the daily income requirements between developed nations and underdeveloped ones, setting the poverty line significantly higher in industrialized nations—as high as \$14.40 a day.<sup>369</sup>

Although this approach has wide appeal because it avoids many of the problems associated with the absolute poverty approach noted above, it also has its critics. As Beaudoin points out, a major worry with this approach concerns income distribution. Measurement of income by household risks ignoring the typically higher level of poverty experienced by larger families who may have similar levels of income as smaller households, as well as the fact that income distribution within

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<sup>368</sup> Beaudoin, 2007: 5.

<sup>369</sup> Ibid.

the family may not be equal. Similarly, applying a national average income, such as the Gross National Product, fails to consider the vast income inequalities that may exist among the wealthy and poor within a given population. Furthermore, difficulties arise in determining what to consider luxury items or necessities, and what potential resources some individuals have as a result of their social relationships or the availability of public goods that others may be lacking. Is a microwave oven, an air-conditioner, or a flushing toilet, for example, a luxury item or are these essential to daily life in developed areas of the United States or the United Kingdom? What about in Nigeria, Bangladesh, or Nepal? Who is to decide and how?

#### **4.1.3. Capability Approach**

The third approach to defining poverty is the Capabilities Approach, which is most often favored for its accuracy in portraying the complexity and multidimensional nature of poverty. It views poverty primarily in terms of inhibiting choices or the freedoms that people enjoy, such as employment, education, healthcare, social standing and social interactions. Here, then, the focus is not on monetary measures or a lack of material goods, but rather on the ability to actively participate in what is considered normal life. Beaudoin suggests that the Capabilities Approach is in a sense the joining of the first two approaches.<sup>370</sup> Like the absolute poverty approach, it acknowledges an absolute aspect of poverty, but focuses on an optimal standard or goal rather than a basic or minimum requirement; however, like the relative poverty approach, it also concedes that such optimal standards be established in accordance with varying cultural and

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<sup>370</sup> Beaudoin, 2007: 6-7.

social values. Because this approach to poverty is so influential, due to its richness and complex nature, it merits a closer focus.

#### **4.1.3.1. Amartya Sen’s Capability Approach**

The Capabilities Approach has been most notably championed by economist Amartya Sen who identifies the primary goal and means of development as enhancing the real choices and freedoms or capabilities that people have in order to allow them to lead the lives they have reason to value.<sup>371</sup> In Sen’s approach to poverty and poverty relief, the most central concepts are capabilities and functioning, two intimately connected concepts, followed by agency.<sup>372</sup> As Sen defines it,

The concept of “functionings,” which has distinctly Aristotelian roots, reflects the various things a person may value doing or being. The valued functionings may vary from elementary ones, such as being adequately nourished and being free from avoidable disease, to very complex activities or personal states, such as being able to take part in the life of the community and having self-respect.<sup>373</sup>

Functionings, for Sen, refer to those things that a person has reason for valuing, doing or being. As Sen notes, there is a wide variety of functionings. It is essentially a subjective term, a category that must be defined by each individual. Sen continues,

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<sup>371</sup> See Sen, 1999.

<sup>372</sup> Comim, 2008: 2-5.

<sup>373</sup> Sen, 1999: 75.

A person's "capability" refers to the alternative combinations of functionings that are feasible for her to achieve. Capability is thus a kind of freedom: the substantive freedom to achieve alternative functioning combinations (or, less formally put, the freedom to achieve various lifestyles). For example, an affluent person who fasts may have the same functioning achievement in terms of eating or nourishment as a destitute person who is forced to starve, but the first person does have a different "capability set" than the second (the first can choose to eat well and be well nourished in a way the second cannot).<sup>374</sup>

This is the essential idea of Sen's influential *Development as Freedom*.<sup>375</sup> The aim of development in Sen's approach is to increase the capacities or the substantial freedoms to pursue those things that individuals have reason to value. This leads to the next central concept: agency.

The expression "agent" is sometimes employed in the literature of economics and game theory to denote a person who is acting on some one else's behalf ... and whose achievements are to be assessed in the light of someone else's ... goals. I am using the term "agent" ... in its older—and "grander"—sense as someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives, whether or not we assess them in terms of some external criteria as well. This work is particularly concerned with the agency role of the individual as a member of the public and as a participant in economic, social and political actions.<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>374</sup> Ibid.

<sup>375</sup> Sen, 1999.

<sup>376</sup> Sen, 1999: 18-19.

Thus, the idea of development is relatively subjective and will mean something different for different individuals, communities and cultures. Participatory approaches, which attempt to include the opinions, values, and goals of the very people who are to be raised out of poverty, are also included within the Capabilities Approach category.

The UNDP adopts a Capabilities Approach in its Human Development Index (HDI), which measures a broad variety of factors contributing to personal fulfillment and opportunity, such as life expectancy at birth, adult literacy levels, and education enrollment ratios. Moving beyond a simple focus on income measures, UNDP conceives of poverty in broader and more comprehensive terms, recognizing that income is only one factor that humans have reason for valuing. Additionally, UNDP combines this HDI data with the Human Poverty Index, which focuses instead on deprivation, in order to obtain a more nuanced and comprehensive perspective on the opportunities for fulfillment among a given population and the extent and nature of the poverty afflicting those in the population who are denied those opportunities.

#### **4.1.3.2. Subjective Well-Being Approach**

An approach to defining poverty that merits further details here, which I briefly mentioned above in relation to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, is the Subjective Well-Being approach. As a more participatory formulation of the Capabilities Approach the Subjective Well-Being approach also offers a critique of the notions of impoverishment and well-being that are dominant in development thinking. Mariono Rojas argues for the Subjective Well-Being approach to poverty, presenting a random data analysis of correlations between income, experienced poverty, experienced economic poverty, and life-satisfaction, demonstrating that income is not a reliable

indicator of one's experience of general well-being, economic well-being, or overall life-satisfaction.<sup>377</sup> Income is only one of the indicators of life-satisfaction and must be considered in light of other indicators related to other aspects of human existence in order to capture the complexity of the experience of poverty. Again here we see a concern for demonstrating a comprehensive and multidimensional understanding of human nature and existence. In the Subjective Well-Being approach, the concern is with what is referred to as experienced poverty, which refers to a low life-satisfaction or what we might call suffering in poverty or suffering due to low levels of satisfaction in the areas of life one values most highly. This distinction is helpful in acknowledging that people experience poverty and wealth in different ways; someone earning an income below an established poverty line may not feel impoverished, while another person with a higher income may experience the stress and suffering often associated with poverty even if their income is above the poverty line. Interestingly, Rojas' data demonstrates that nearly equal percentages of low-income earners are not considered poor on the experienced poverty scale as those that are considered poor on the experienced poverty scale but who are not considered low income.<sup>378</sup> Considering both of these cases, if income were the main criterion, we would incorrectly evaluate the impoverishment of nearly a quarter of the participants. Rojas notes that income and expenditure may be more or less effective at indicating a person or family's economic satisfaction, but not the much broader and instructive category of life-satisfaction.<sup>379</sup>

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<sup>377</sup> Rojas, 2009.

<sup>378</sup> Rojas, 2009: 12-13.

<sup>379</sup> Rojas, 2009: 8.

Rojas further outlines several fundamental principles concerning poverty that the Subjective Well-Being approach is based on, demonstrating its skepticism toward approaches that focus on income as the sole or primary criterion for poverty.<sup>380</sup> The basic principles indicate that well-being is a subjective notion and as such cannot be defined or determined as effectively by a third-party as it can by the real-life person experiencing it. Each individual is in the best position to determine their own lived experience of well-being or suffering based on their own conceptions of well-being and life-satisfaction, happiness, or a good life, and such experience and value judgments cannot be dictated to them by experts or professionals.

The multidimensional and interdisciplinary approach to studying poverty is at the heart of the Subjective Well-Being approach. While most research on poverty has focused on only one indicator, or some relatively small sample of them, Rojas demonstrates that the relationship between life- satisfaction and satisfaction in other specific and measurable domains is complex, including, but not limited to the domains of health, work, economic, friends, family, self and community. Including such a wide variety of the many domains that make up human experience allows for a more accurate determination to emerge. An important point here is that satisfaction in any of these domains, as well as the priority of each of them, is wholly subjective, meaning that development goals and methods must be set to a certain degree by the participants. While moving out of the experienced poverty category and into a higher life-satisfaction is an ultimate goal, moving out of income poverty is also seen as a goal, but only as a means to arrive at the end goal of higher overall life-satisfaction.<sup>381</sup>

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<sup>380</sup> Rojas, 2009: 3-6.

<sup>381</sup> Rojas, 2009: 17-22.

Rojas also points out that high satisfaction in one domain can compensate for lower satisfaction in another making the overall level of life satisfaction higher.<sup>382</sup> For example, high satisfaction with family may compensate for low satisfaction in the economic domain, or vice versa. Rojas' model allows for those who are low income earners to nevertheless move out of the experienced poverty category, meaning that although they may continue to have relatively little income, they nonetheless experience high levels of satisfaction with other areas of life, areas that they consider more important and satisfying overall than income.

Using Beaudoin's conceptual model as a foundation for approaching poverty, in this chapter I will address the concepts or notions of poverty found in the Pāli Canon, as well as related Mahāyāna sūtras which indicate that these concepts were largely carried over into later traditions. While many of these passages will refer to poverty in an absolute sense, I will demonstrate that a substantial overlap exists with these Buddhist notions of poverty and the Capabilities Approach that is currently in use among a host of development agencies.

## **4.2. Concepts of Poverty and Poverty Relief in the Pāli Canon**

While the notion of suffering is the primary preoccupation in Buddhist thought, surprisingly little has been written concerning the forms of suffering resulting from extreme poverty. Although poverty and poverty relief are issues that are clearly pertinent to Buddhist economic ethics, the current literature principally offers critiques of Western economic models that focus on overcoming greed and integrating more humanistic values in line with Buddhist thought with economic behavior without directly addressing impoverishment in its own right. However, some

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<sup>382</sup> Rojas, 2009: 14-16.

scholars, such as Mavis Fenn, David Loy, and Peter Hershock, have broached this vital topic with clear explications of Buddhist approaches to issues of material impoverishment based on canonical texts and key Buddhist doctrines.<sup>383</sup> I will here give an overview of the Buddhist perspectives on the nature of poverty that can then be drawn out of the canonical materials, followed by the analyses offered by Fenn, Hershock, and Loy as they offer important insights that typify Buddhist conceptions of poverty and poverty relief.

#### **4.2.1. Poverty in the Pāli Canon**

What, then, is the perspective on poverty found in the Buddhist texts? How is poverty portrayed? What does the term mean when used in Buddhist scriptures and texts? An examination of the references to poverty in the Pāli Canon reveals a complex perspective on poverty that includes a diverse array of purposes, causes, and effects. The common misconception in the West of Buddhism as unconcerned with material suffering is bolstered by the frequent portrayals in the Pāli Canon of poverty as beneficial, and the frequent praise of poverty as a virtue and even as an essential step on the path to salvation. However, this simplistic view overlooks the plain fact that canonical passages also clearly identify poverty in negative terms—as a hindrance to individual spiritual development, a social detriment, and a source of much individual and collective suffering. Thus, the texts clearly distinguish between two concepts of poverty, one negative, and

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<sup>383</sup> While Buddhist approaches to poverty relief are also to be found among Socially Engaged Buddhist activists and practitioners, I focus here on theoretical academic works. I will, however, return to Engaged Buddhist practitioners as examples of poverty relief principles in practice.

one positive.<sup>384</sup> I will address these conceptions of poverty found in the Pāli Canon, which outlines the earliest known notions of poverty in the Buddhist tradition. I focus here on the Pāli Canon because it is recognized by virtually all schools of Buddhism as an authoritative source of early Buddhist teachings, and because the Mahāyāna sūtras seem less concerned with the nature of poverty than with the obligation to relieve the suffering of the poor and how this ought to be accomplished; the Mahāyāna developments on the conceptions of poverty relief will be a significant focus of the following chapter.

#### 4.2.1.1. Material vs. Spiritual Poverty and Wealth

A distinction is made at times between material and spiritual poverty and wealth. In contrast to the material sense of wealth and poverty, as in destitution, the terms poverty and wealth are often employed in spiritual terms, such as when these labels describe those who have attained, or alternatively those who lack, virtue or faithfulness. In the *Debt Sutta*, for example, the Buddha draws a comparison between the material poverty a householder might suffer under and the spiritual poverty of a monk that is said to be poor in the discipline. Much like a poor householder might borrow and enter into debt in a material sense, such a monk who is spiritually impoverished is also said to enter into a woeful form of debt because he lacks certain virtues and secretly works evil deeds, thoughts, and words.<sup>385</sup>

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<sup>384</sup> This point has been made by Fenn and will be discussed in more detail below. See Fenn, 1996.

<sup>385</sup> AN 6: 45 (Hare, 1934: 249-251).

In the *Poor Sutta* of the *Sakka-saṃyutta*, this notion of spiritual wealth is depicted as something which may remain unnoticed and yet which nonetheless prevails over indigent material circumstances as certain divine beings, called devas, are taught that, contrary to all appearances, a materially poor man is in reality wealthy because of his faith. The Buddha recounts this tale of an indigent pauper who undertook “faith, virtue, learning, generosity, and wisdom in the Dhamma and Discipline proclaimed by the Tathāgata.”<sup>386</sup> As a result of this faithfulness, he was reborn into a heavenly world where he outshone the other Tāvatiṃsa devas in their divine beauty and glory. The Tāvatiṃsa devas then complained that this man who had previously been so poor became more glorious than any of them. Sakka, lord of the devas, defended this situation as merely the result of the faithful and virtuous undertakings in his previous life as a pauper, describing that faith and virtue as a wealth prevailing in importance over his indigent material circumstances.

When one has faith in the Tathāgata,  
 Unshakable and well established,  
 And good conduct built on virtue,  
 Dear to the noble ones and praised;  
 When one has confidence in the *saṅgha*  
 And, one's view is straightened out,  
 they say that one isn't poor;  
 One's life is not in vain.<sup>387</sup>

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<sup>386</sup> SN 11:14 (Bodhi, 2000: 331-332). *Tathāgata* translates into English as Thus-gone, that is Attained to the Truth, and is a title that virtually always refers to the Buddha.

<sup>387</sup> SN 11:14 (Bodhi, 2000: 332).

While preserving the role of wealth as a worthy goal, the Buddha compared the notions of material poverty and wealth with spiritual cultivation, repeatedly affirming the supremacy of spiritual wealth over material wealth. This is evident in the plain assertion of one of the best-known Buddhist texts, the *Dhammapada*, that contentment is the greatest wealth.<sup>388</sup> Virtue or righteousness in the *Dhamma* is thus portrayed as *true* wealth, and those who perfect the Buddhist virtues are *truly* wealthy and *truly* powerful. The *Kuddāla-Jātaka* includes a clear indication of this superiority of spiritual goods in a comparison between the overcoming of spiritual obstacles versus physical obstacles. The Buddha begins this tale with a poor young man who had nothing but the spade that he used for gardening.<sup>389</sup> Upon realizing that the monks were eating better than he was and yet they were not toiling in the field to grow just enough food to eat, he hid his spade and became a recluse, living a life of simplicity like the monks. However, the tale continues, time and again the young man was overcome by greed and returned to the world of labor and ownership, only to forsake it again and return to the ascetic life. On the seventh time that he returned to his garden, he reminisced upon all the problems that the spade had caused him and he made up his mind to forsake it once and for all. Afraid he might return to his spade if he saw where it went, he closed his eyes and spun it around his head before throwing it with all his strength into a great river. Upon finally giving up all material possessions and thereby freeing himself from this attachment to his previous lifestyle, the monk repeatedly shouted “I have conquered!”<sup>390</sup> He was approached by a powerful worldly ruler returning from conquering his own foes in battle, who asked the monk whom he had conquered, and explained

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<sup>388</sup> Dhp 204 (Buddharakkhita, 2010: 55.)

<sup>389</sup> Jat 70 (Cowell, 1895: 168-171).

<sup>390</sup> Jat 70 (Cowell, 1895: 169-170).

that he had also just recently conquered his enemies in a grand battle. The monk explained to the king that of the two he was the *true* conqueror himself because his battle was spiritual rather than material as was the ruler's, inasmuch as he had conquered greed and lust in himself.<sup>391</sup>

Mahāyāna texts generally support and incorporate the concepts of poverty found in the Pāli Canon, although there are some significant developments in the duties to relieve poverty, which will be discussed more fully below. As do passages in the Pāli Canon, Mahāyāna texts also often speak of wealth and poverty in spiritual instead of exclusively material terms. The *Upāsakaśīla-sūtra*, for example, explains that if a person “has doubts with regards to the field of blessings” from giving, or “has much wealth, is free from obstructions, and there is a good field of blessings [to accept his offerings], but he still has no faith and cannot give”, he is poor.<sup>392</sup> Thus, again we can see the terms ‘wealth’ and ‘poverty’ employed in spiritual senses of the words. Moreover, again we see in Mahāyāna texts such as this that material goods are often subordinated to spiritual qualities; spiritual wealth, or the wealth of faithfulness or virtue is depicted as having more value than any material wealth. While there are abundant passages defining poverty as a lack of key virtues, it is important to note that this is not the only notion of poverty in Buddhist texts; numerous passages also define poverty primarily in material terms.

#### 4.2.1.2. Simplicity vs. Deprivation

As Fenn notes, the Pāli language contains different words to refer to these two very different concepts of poverty. In virtually all cases referring to poverty as a form of material deprivation,

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<sup>391</sup> Jat 70 (Cowell, 1895: 168-171).

<sup>392</sup> Uss Chapter XIX (Shih, 1994: 113-114).

the Pāli word used is *dalidda*.<sup>393</sup> This means someone who is poor, indigent, or a pauper. When referring to simplicity and non-attachment, the ideal of voluntary poverty undertaken by the *saṅgha*, the Pāli word most often used is *akiñcana*, meaning possessionless, particularly in the spiritual sense of non-attachment to material goods.<sup>394</sup> There is a clear distinction in the Pāli Canon, therefore, between the notions of material poverty as simplicity and poverty as deprivation.<sup>395</sup> Moreover, poverty as deprivation is virtually always portrayed negatively in the Pāli Canon. On the other hand, poverty as simplicity, or the possessionlessness voluntarily undertaken as one enters the *saṅgha*—forsaking nearly all personal material possessions as well as the accompanying political or social standing that is based on material or other physical qualities—is universally portrayed positively.

#### 4.2.1.2.1. Poverty as Simplicity

Most of the references to material poverty found in the Pāli Canon portray it in a positive light, as a virtue and an essential step on the path to enlightenment or liberation. In keeping with teachings on removing craving and grasping, which inevitably lead to suffering and rebirth, the Buddha taught that one must overcome any greed or attachment, particularly to material possessions, in order to attain enlightenment. Thus, the ideal becomes material simplicity with a complete non-attachment, in particular to material goods. In the *Brahmajāla Sutta*, for example, the Buddha teaches the monks numerous different types of wrong view and promotes a life with

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<sup>393</sup> Fenn, 1996: 120; 1994:76-79.

<sup>394</sup> The Pāli Text Society's Pāli-English Dictionary defines *akiñcana* as the "state of having nothing, absence of (any) possessions; nothingness." See Davids, 1921: 94.

<sup>395</sup> Fenn, 1996.

minimum possessions, supported by donations, and free from the wrong view of addiction to the enjoyment of stored-up goods.<sup>396</sup> This type of voluntary poverty is known as possessionlessness or alternatively as homelessness. In the *Sonaka-Jātaka*, 8 blessings of the monk are described, which are due to the lack of wealth and homelessness.<sup>397</sup> And, in the *Cūlahatthipadopama Sutta*, non-attachment to material goods and a life of simplicity is again promoted as the way to spiritual fulfillment and the reasons for a renouncer's worthiness.<sup>398</sup> Again, in the *Sangāra Sutta*, the Buddha bestows typical high praise on the ascetics who willingly take up a life of homelessness, teaching that it is the renouncer who attains the 'further shore' of liberation.<sup>399</sup> Thus, monks voluntarily take up a life of homelessness, by giving up virtually all personal possessions, excepting a few basic items like a bowl and robes, and the social or political standing that often follow them, and, upon entering the *saṅgha*, live only on donor charity and the collective possessions of the *saṅgha*.<sup>400</sup> The Buddha frequently taught these principles to those seeking to undertake the path to enlightenment.

The narrative of the conquering monk found in the *Kuddāla-Jātaka*, which I briefly summarized above, also provides an example of the value of a possessionless life in the pursuit of liberation.

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<sup>396</sup> DN 1 (Walshe 1995: 69-70).

<sup>397</sup> Jat 529 (Cowell, 1905:130-131).

<sup>398</sup> MN 27: 12-14 (Ñāṇamoli, 1995: 272-274); Sn III.5 (Fausboll, 1881: 80-85).

<sup>399</sup> AN 10: 117 (Hare, 1934: 160-161).

<sup>400</sup> Although Theravāda monks undoubtedly have social standing within their communities, this is based on their perceived virtue and on the renunciation of personal possessions. Additionally, this distinction between the ascetics and the laity later blurred in Mahāyāna developments as monks began to work and retain family relationships and even political and social standing.

The poor young man, before becoming a monk, had nothing but the spade that he used for gardening.<sup>401</sup> Nevertheless, as the tale indicates, time and again this little spade lured the young man into craving and attachment, which led to a cycle of repeatedly forsaking the world of labor and ownership in order to undertake an ascetic life, only to return to the life of labor and ownership again.<sup>402</sup> Overcoming this temptation, the cycle resulting from craving and attachment, is seen as an essential step toward enlightenment.

Customarily, the monks are allowed only the most minimal possessions. While describing the steps that a disciple must take toward enlightenment, the Buddha included forsaking a householder's life of fortune and family for a life of homelessness, living contentedly with only robes for protection and alms-food to eat like a bird that "flies with its wings as its only burden."<sup>403</sup> They were originally said to possess only the 'four requisites' which represent only the basic necessities to sustain life: food from begging, robe from a dust heap, dwelling at the foot of a tree, and fermented cattle urine as medicine.<sup>404</sup> An important implication here is that everyone— even those pursuing the ascetic ideal of simplicity— ought to have the basic requirements of life, including food, clothing, shelter, and at least some basic level of health care. But it is important to recognize that monks do not only forsake material possessions, but also forsake traditional family relationships and political and social standing based upon these things.

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<sup>401</sup> Jat 70 (Cowell, 1895: 168-171).

<sup>402</sup> Jat 70 (Cowell, 1895: 169-170).

<sup>403</sup> MN 27 (Ñāṇamoli, 1995: 274)

<sup>404</sup> Loy, 2003a: 55; Ud 2.4 (Strong, 1902: 16); MN 2 (Ñāṇamoli, 1995: 94). These requisites have since increased to include other basic possessions for modern life, such as a razor, a mosquito net, a water kettle, etc.

Several passages in the Pāli Canon, including the *Bandhanāgāra Jātaka*, *Kumbhakāra Jātaka*, The *Udāna*, and the *Vessantara Jātaka* go so far as to present family negatively, as objects of craving or attachment.<sup>405</sup> However, while they forsake social and political standing based upon family name or possessions, the monks—Theravāda monks in particular—in a sense exchange this standing for social standing that is based instead on their perceived virtue and the renunciation of personal possessions.

The ideal then becomes simplicity, meaning a general non-attachment and voluntary forsaking of material accumulation and the corresponding political and social standing built on it. The *saṅgha* stands as the clear example, but an important point is that they are examples to the lay-followers. While the monastic *saṅgha* is required to live by more strict codes of behavior in these regards, they stand as examples of the ideals toward which even the lay-followers strive. While lay-followers do not typically forsake all their possessions, unless they join the monastic *saṅgha*, they are urged to strive to overcome craving and attachment, to live a more contented life of simplicity to the degree that they can as householders.

#### 4.2.1.2.2. Poverty as Deprivation

Voluntary poverty, however, is only one notion of poverty conveyed in the Pāli Canon. There are also a number of significant passages which elucidate the corresponding negative aspects of material poverty- those related to deprivation. As I have previously noted, the *Dhammapada*, for

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<sup>405</sup> Jat 201 (Cowell, 1895b: 97-98); Jat 408 (Cowell, 1897: 228-232); Ud 2.6 (Woodward, 1935: 17); Jat 547 (Cowell, 1907: 246-305).

example, succinctly proclaims “hunger is the worst disease.”<sup>406</sup> While hunger here is often read merely as a general craving or attachment, it is undeniable that physical hunger is one particularly severe form of craving that is most difficult to overcome. Moreover, the basic message of the Middle Way is that starvation and mortification are as unhealthy as is hedonistic consumption. Poverty as deprivation is identified in the texts as a source of suffering and hindrance to spiritual development on an individual level; it is also identified as the cause of broader social ills which, if allowed to reach systemic levels, eventually lead to complete moral depravity and the decay of society at large.

Material poverty is specified as a source of suffering in the *Debt Sutta*, in which the Buddha teaches that for householders, poverty is ‘a woeful thing’.<sup>407</sup> Poverty leads one further and further into debt and thereby creates additional negative mental states and stress from the bills which must be repaid. Furthermore, poverty prevents one from enjoying those pleasures defined as worthy goals and rights of a householder—*artha*. This is specifically noted as the Buddha points to the pleasure of property, as one of the worthy pleasures or rights of householders.<sup>408</sup> Even more so than in the Pāli Canon, we find numerous passages in Mahāyāna sūtras referring to material poverty as a hardship to be alleviated. For example, *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines* plainly asserts, “all beings . . . should not go short of the requirements of life.”<sup>409</sup> Here we see clearly that the basic necessities of life should be available to all.

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<sup>406</sup> Dhp 203-204 (Buddharakkhita, 2010: 54-55).

<sup>407</sup> AN 6: 45 (Hare, 1934: 249-250).

<sup>408</sup> AN 4: 62 (Nyanaponika, 1999: 99-100).

<sup>409</sup> AP 363 (Conze, 1970: 218).

This notion of poverty entails the view that involuntary material poverty, or deprivation, stands as an obstacle or hindrance to one’s spiritual development and progression on the path to enlightenment. This is evident in the well-known narrative from the *Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā*, in which the Buddha postponed beginning his sermon to a group of well-off listeners until after a poor peasant had eaten, asserting that “there is no affliction like the affliction of hunger.”<sup>410</sup> This *Dhammapada* commentary expands the narrative to tell us that the Buddha then explained, “I thought to myself, ‘If I preach the Law to this man while he is suffering from the pangs of hunger, he will not be able to comprehend it’.”<sup>411</sup> Although the Buddha had ascertained that the man was in a proper general condition to take in the *Dhamma*, his hungry state seems to have presented a current obstacle to his breakthrough to ‘stream entry’.

Furthermore, in *The Hindrances*, the Buddha describes particular circumstances that are often specifically associated with poverty as hindrances to spiritual development. He teaches that if a monk is ill, if there is a famine or it is otherwise difficult to get food, or if there is danger such as from robbers then this is a “wrong time for striving,” meaning specifically the supreme endeavor of striving for liberation, or nirvana.<sup>412</sup> This passage identifies certain material conditions that are necessary for spiritual progression, and explicitly names as hindrances those very conditions which are typically associated with poverty- illness, physical danger, and difficulty in attaining the necessities of life. As a hindrance to spiritual progression and full inclusion in the activities of the faith community—those very things that the Buddhist community promotes as the highest

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<sup>410</sup> DTK 15.5 (Burlingame, 1921b: 74-76).

<sup>411</sup> DTK 15.5 (Burlingame, 1921b: 76).

<sup>412</sup> AN 5: 54 (Hare, 1934: 54-55).

values—poverty stands as a lack of capabilities and substantial freedoms; it prevents individuals and communities from pursuing the very things they have reason to value.

Perhaps the single most important passages concerning poverty in the Pāli Canon are found in the *Cakkavatti-Sihanāda Sutta* which identifies poverty both as a cause of immoral behavior of individuals and of a wider range of social ills and decay.<sup>413</sup> In this sutta the Buddha tells a tale of a line of righteous monarchs, each of whom performed their duties correctly, ruling in righteousness, honoring the *Dhamma*, protecting their subjects, preventing all crime in the kingdom, and preventing widespread poverty by giving property to the needy.<sup>414</sup> Later, however, one of the rulers did not follow the final prescribed counsel of giving property to the needy and it led to tragic results. The effects of withholding property from the needy are elaborately delineated, portraying the gradual and eventual destruction of any form of civilization or humanity in the kingdom. Poverty steadily increased in the kingdom until it became rampant. As a result of this poverty, one poor man was compelled by his utter lack to steal from another man and was arrested and taken before the king. As he was originally counseled to do, the king gave the poor man enough property to operate a business for the support of his mother, father, wife and children, and to give gifts to monks for his own spiritual welfare.<sup>415</sup> Another man was later arrested for stealing, and was also given property in this manner by the king. As a consequence of the king's fear that word might spread throughout the kingdom that the king was essentially rewarding theft by allotting property to those who were arrested for stealing, and that this might

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<sup>413</sup> DN 26 (Walshe, 1995: 395-405).

<sup>414</sup> DN 26 (Walshe, 1995: 397).

<sup>415</sup> DN 26 (Walshe, 1995: 398-399).

then encourage others to steal, the king decided instead to punish as harshly as possible the next thief with decapitation.

When word spread throughout the kingdom of the king's severe punishment of the thief, the reaction of the people was wholly unpredicted. Undeterred by the threat of such a harsh punishment, the people instead thought:

Now let us get sharp swords made for us, and then we can take from anybody what is not given [which is called theft], we will make an end of them, finish them off once for all and cut off their heads.”<sup>416</sup>

Accordingly, they then armed themselves and began murderous assaults and plunder on other villages, decapitating their victims even as the king had done to the thieves as punishment for their crimes. The Buddha then gives an important and revealing commentary, relating all of the resultant social deterioration and dehumanizing behavior back to the king's initial failure to provide for the poor:

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 – and from the taking of life, people's lifespan decreased, their beauty decreased. . . .”<sup>417</sup>

Fenn argues that the particular usage in the text of the phrase ‘from this... this’ in the chain of

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<sup>416</sup> DN 26 (Walshe, 1995: 399).

<sup>417</sup> DN 26 (Walshe, 1995: 399-400).

events is meant to make a clear connection from each event to the next; from the withholding of property from the poor as the cause to the eventual complete degeneration and destruction of society and essentially the complete loss of any sense of humanity.<sup>418</sup> In so doing, the narrative serves to indicate the wide-ranging effects of poverty. Firstly, poverty often leads individuals to commit crime, such as theft and murder; it not only leads to more immoral behavior, but also to more severe types of immoral behavior. As we have seen earlier in the discussion of Buddhist ethics, in Buddhist thought, individuals and the karma that their thoughts and actions generate can more broadly affect society as a whole. Secondly, as poverty advances from an individual problem to a systemic one, its effects are far more severe, precluding not only the impoverished individual, but all members of the community from spiritual advancement. The *Cakkavatti-Sihanāda Sutta* indicates that once it advances to the systemic stage, poverty becomes the cause of spiritual decay and the utter destruction of any sense of humanity. As Fenn notes:

In Buddhist psychology consciousness must always be consciousness of something....

The consciousness that perceives others as beasts is itself bestial. The ultimate consequence of poverty, then, is to remove an individual from the human realm, the only realm within which [nirvana] may be realized.<sup>419</sup>

In this sense, poverty is seen not merely as a deprivation of material goods, but as a form of social exclusion and an obstacle to the very spiritual fulfillment that makes existence meaningful. The poor are excluded from the social behaviors and actions that generate merit and ensure their progress towards eventual liberation, such as, for example, *dāna* or donations to the *saṅgha*.

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<sup>418</sup> Fenn, 1994: 110-114.

<sup>419</sup> Fenn, 1996: 106.

Furthermore, as moral decay advances, people essentially come to behave in a more bestial than human way, and are thus no longer capable of generating the type of karma or merit that will ensure them a good rebirth. Indeed, their behavior will more likely guarantee eventual rebirth in a lower realm. Furthermore, as poverty becomes systemic and the process of degeneration continues, the laity can no longer provide support for the *saṅgha*, the *saṅgha* then is no longer capable of striving for the release of nirvana, and are thereby excluded from that community which facilitates their enlightenment. Thus, “the material deprivation of some individuals causes the moral impoverishment of all”.<sup>420</sup> Again, we see an emphasis on the inter-relatedness comprising society and on the collective suffering that necessarily results from the process of impoverishment.

#### 4.2.2. Notions of Poverty Compared

Returning now to the key categories of conceptions of poverty, the Pāli Canon often describes material poverty in terms of absolute poverty, representing a monetary perspective on poverty. For example, as I have noted above, a person defined as one who is destitute is said to be in need of the four basic commodities: food, clothing, shelter, and medicine.<sup>421</sup> Thus, one most basic way to understand poverty in the Pāli Canon is as the lack of these basic necessities required to sustain life.

On the other hand, there are also more complex portrayals of poverty as a cause of social exclusion in which the poor are deprived of the opportunity to participate in normal social

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<sup>420</sup> Ibid.

<sup>421</sup> Loy, 2003a: 55; Ud 2.4 (Strong, 1902: 16); MN 2 (Ñāṇamoli, 1995: 94).

functions like donating to the *saṅgha*— the exclusion from which in fact may present an obstacle to an individual’s advancement toward liberation; such portrayals are indicative of a capabilities approach to poverty. Personal mental and spiritual development in the pursuit of liberation as an ideal goal is certainly in keeping with an approach to poverty that places optimal value on personal fulfilment and freedoms. As noted in the previous chapter, in this psychological dimension to poverty and human development, Buddhism shares some affinity with Self-Actualization and Humanistic psychology, such as that promoted by Maslow, as well as the contemporary positive psychology movement and its focus on happiness and well-being.<sup>422</sup>

UNDP has also incorporated some of the features of a happiness approach and Humanist psychology in the relatively recent turn towards human development and human security in their capabilities approach to poverty. Although, not as clearly defined or as developed as these models in assessing poverty with their advanced assessment mechanisms, the Buddhist approach to poverty bears some similarities on key points. Early Buddhist texts, such as the *Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā* narrative noted above, similarly assert the overriding need for basic material necessities as a prerequisite for the ultimate preeminent goal of mental and spiritual advancement toward enlightenment. In accordance with the capabilities approach, the focus here is on optimal well-being, happiness, or satisfaction, rather than merely on the basic requirements for survival. I have also indicated further that the early Buddhist tradition includes central teachings on interdependent social relationships among the rulers, the laity, and the *saṅgha*, which relationships are instrumental, if not in fact essential, to one’s enlightenment, making the exclusion from full participation in them detrimental. Furthermore, these central teachings entail

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<sup>422</sup> Pio, 1988: 117-122.

a strong emphasis on communities supporting individuals in undertaking voluntary forms of poverty and, thus, in promoting social and spiritual values over material goods. In the capabilities approach terms, participation in community, family, friendship, and mental and physical health can all be functionings that humans have reason to value and that contribute to a high level of life satisfaction. Similarly, the very notion of simplicity may be explained very well in the economic terms of Subjective Well-Being. The ideal of simplicity, in this sense, requires a transformation or a shift in values that result in a lower value placed on income and other purely materialistic goals, with a corresponding higher level of life-satisfaction resulting from high levels of satisfaction in other domains of human existence—broader well-being and health, participation in a community, and so forth. In this way, the monastic *saṅgha* and faithful lay-followers may find themselves contented and non-attached in a low-income or income poverty experience category, while also maintaining a high life-satisfaction level that precludes them from the broader poverty experience category.

Interestingly, the notion of relative poverty appears to be foreign to Buddhist thought. While the enormous wealth of some individuals is noted, and even praised, as in the popular example of Anathāpiṇḍika, the idea that some people are considered poor because they do not have the same level of wealth as others in the community does not seem to occur in Buddhist texts. This is likely because the very nature of this notion seems at odds with ideal of simplicity and the Middle Way approach which values having the basics needed for optimal well-being and doing without excess. While individual wealth is certainly praised, lacking wealth beyond one's needs is not presented as a deficiency, but rather more as a virtue.

### 4.2.3. Causes of Poverty

Having just addressed the general notions of poverty found in the Pāli Canon, I will now turn to the causes of poverty identified in the Pāli Canon. Although karma is often assumed to be the primary cause, if not the sole cause, for one's poor condition, in early texts it is not always so; socio-political causes and individual actions in the current life are also noted.

#### 4.2.3.1. Karma

A common assumption concerning Buddhist approaches to poverty is that impoverishment is caused by karma, and should therefore simply be accepted as one's lot in life. In actuality, the Buddhist view on the role of karma as the cause of impoverishment is somewhat ambiguous. In the Pāli Canon, karma is often pointed to as the cause of impoverishment or, alternatively, prosperity. In the *Khadiraṅgāra-Jatāka*, for example, the wealthy lay donor Anāthapiṇḍika loses his wealth by giving donations to the Buddha and ceasing any further business undertakings. But, after only a brief period of impoverishment, his wealth is miraculously restored to him. The Buddha teaches that this is the karmic fruit of his generosity and goodness.<sup>423</sup> Similarly, in the *Siri Jātaka*, due to jealousy of Anāthapiṇḍika's fortune in regaining wealth after his impoverishment, a brahmin recognizes that this results from karma and tries to steal Anāthapiṇḍika's good fortune by stealing the items in which it is said to temporarily reside so that he may also become wealthy.<sup>424</sup> The Buddha teaches that it cannot be stolen, but that the merit of past lives enables people to obtain all types of “treasure in places where there is no

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<sup>423</sup> Jat 40 (Cowell, 1895a: 100-105).

<sup>424</sup> Jat 284 (Cowell, 1895b: 279-282).

mine,” both physical and spiritual.<sup>425</sup> These passages clearly point to karma as the reason for wealth or poverty.

The *Cūḷakammavibhanga Sutta*, a very significant sūtra for a discussion of poverty and karma, reaches a similar conclusion. Here a brahmin student asks the Buddha why some human beings appear to have obtained superior states compared to others, or in other words, why some have short lives while others have long lives; some are sickly while others are healthy; some are wealthy, some poor, some beautiful and some ugly, and so forth.<sup>426</sup> The Buddha explains to him that these differences are based on their previous actions. The text explicitly states that rebirth in poor circumstances results from a variety of karmically harmful behaviors. For example, a murderous or violent person, if reborn in a human state and not in a hell or some other lowly destination, will live a short life. Of particular importance is the Buddha’s teaching that not giving “food, drink, clothing, carriages, garlands, scents, unguents, beds, dwelling, and lamps to recluses or brahmins” leads specifically to rebirth into a state of poverty.<sup>427</sup> Here the Buddha himself directly addresses impoverishment and names individual karmic demerit as the cause.

Elsewhere, the Buddha taught the devatā Anāthapiṇḍika that individual merit is the cause of one's condition in life by saying that “action, knowledge, righteousness, virtue, and excellent life” are what purifies one, and not one’s clan or wealth.<sup>428</sup> In the sutta directly following this, the *Macchhari Sutta*, or the *Discourse on Stinginess*, the Buddha teaches another devatā that

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<sup>425</sup> Jat 284 (Cowell, 1895b: 279-281).

<sup>426</sup> MN 135 (Ñāṇamoli, 1995:1053- 1057).

<sup>427</sup> Ibid.

<sup>428</sup> SN 48 (Bodhi, 2000: 123).

stingy or miserly people in this world are generally born into a hell or suffer a ghost or an animal rebirth. If they are fortunate enough to be reborn in a human state, “they are born in a poor family where clothes, food, pleasures, and sport are obtained only with difficulty.” Those who are generous and faithful, on the other hand, are reborn into a heaven or into a rich family.<sup>429</sup>

However, while these passages seem to clearly state that impoverishment or wealth are the results of previous karma, one important point to keep in mind concerning karma is noted in the Pāli Canon: a poor state of rebirth resulting from the law of karma is not permanent and can be improved upon by the same law. Thus, even if poverty was to result directly and solely from karmic demerit, the impoverished state would not simply need to be blindly accepted as one’s lot in life, but could in fact be changed. The *Maccalāvagga* and other suttas refer expressly to people who are born into a poor state as a karmic consequence and yet have the ability to raise themselves out of this state by their own efforts. The Buddha contrasts this with those who are born wealthy and yet, as a result of their behavior, are “bound for darkness” or a lower state in the next life.<sup>430</sup> The *Mahānārada-kassapa Jātaka* also contains a discourse on merit and karma, teaching that those born into miserable and poor circumstances can improve their lot in future lives through karma.<sup>431</sup> A young slave in the tale serves to demonstrate that if the laws of karma are rejected, there is no longer hope for the future because this would remove the very possibility that one’s actions could positively change anyone’s future situation.<sup>432</sup>

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<sup>429</sup> SN 49 (Bodhi, 2000: 123-125).

<sup>430</sup> AN 4.85 (Cowell, 1895b: 94-95).

<sup>431</sup> Jat 544 (Cowell, 1907: 114-126).

<sup>432</sup> Jat 544 (Cowell, 1907: 117).

Because karma is seen as the cause of numerous and diverse conditions, including the realm or form of rebirth, general character, key good or bad occurrences, and the general experience of life, it lends itself to fatalistic misinterpretations.<sup>433</sup> It should be noted, however, that the Buddha seems to have entirely rejected any such fatalistic interpretation of the law of karma. A number of passages in the Pāli Canon, for example, question the caste-system accepted at the time of early Buddhism, which asserted that one's caste was solely determined by birth as the result of *karma*.<sup>434</sup> These passages indicate that one's caste is not dependent on birth, and thus, by implication, cannot be dependent solely on karma from a previous life. The Buddha also warned against the belief that everything that occurs or every condition in life is the inevitable result of karma from previous lives, thereby denouncing those who believe that every pleasure or pain they experience results from previous actions.<sup>435</sup> In the *Girimānanda Sutta*, the Buddha indicates numerous conditions, most notably hunger and thirst, that are not the result of karma, but rather the result of circumstance.

Herein a monk who has gone to the forest . . . thus contemplates: This body has many ills, many disadvantages. Thus, in this body arise divers diseases, such as: disease of eyesight and hearing, of nose, tongue, trunk, head, ear, mouth, teeth; there is cough, asthma, catarrh, fever, decrepitude, belly-ache, swooning, dysentery, griping, cholera, leprosy, imposthume, eczema, phthisis, epilepsy; skin-disease, itch, scab, tetter, scabies; bile-in-

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<sup>433</sup> Harvey, 2000: 23-24.

<sup>434</sup> MN 84 (Ñāṇamoli, 1995: 698-703); Sn 133-142, 594-656 (Fausböhl, 1881: 22-24, 109-116); Dhṛp 393-423 (Müller, 1881: 91-96).

<sup>435</sup> AN 3.61 (Woodward, 1932: 157-158); MN 101 (Ñāṇamoli, 1995: 827-838); SN 36.21-22 (Bodhi, 2000: 1279).

the-blood (jaundice), diabetes, piles, boils, ulcers; diseases arising from bile, from phlegm, from wind, from the union of bodily humours, from changes of the seasons, from stress of circumstances, or from the ripeness of one's karma; also cold and heat, hunger and thirst, evacuation and urination. Thus he abides observant of the disadvantages of this body.<sup>436</sup>

As Harvey notes, while karma can be understood as a basic law of cause and effect, this does not imply that every event or condition in life is necessarily the direct result solely of one's own previous actions; nor does karma interfere with one's freedom to choose or imply that the act of choosing is itself predetermined by previous acts.<sup>437</sup> Such teachings would clearly undermine the Buddha's entire message. Furthermore, the Buddha declared that some conditions are the result of causes beyond one's control, such as another's actions, accident, or natural causes.<sup>438</sup>

Some of the difficulty in recognizing karmic results is because they do not necessarily manifest in the current life, or even the next, but may take many lifetimes to come to fruition. Thus, ethical or moral behavior will certainly lead to a good rebirth, although it may not necessarily be the *next* rebirth.<sup>439</sup> Furthermore, the specific karma generated from any thought or act is dependent on a number of variables, including the intention of the doer, the overall character of the doer, and any ensuing feelings of regret or repentance.<sup>440</sup> The Buddha makes this strikingly

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<sup>436</sup> AN 10: 60 (Woodward, 1936: 75-76).

<sup>437</sup> Harvey, 2000: 23-26.

<sup>438</sup> SN 36.21-22 (Bodhi, 2000: 1279); Harvey, 2000: 23.

<sup>439</sup> MN 136 (Ñāṇamoli, 1995: 1059-1065).

<sup>440</sup> AKB 4.120 (Vasubandhu, 1988: 701); SN 42.8 (Bodhi, 2000: 1340-1344).

clear in the *Lonaphala sutta*.<sup>441</sup> Referring to the obvious disparity between the way that the rich and the poor are treated, he teaches that karmic results of actions vary among agents depending on their spiritual attainment or character. The lot of the rich and poor is compared in order to explain how the same action can lead to different consequences for different people. The Buddha asks the monks questions concerning the sort of person who would be punished more harshly with time in prison, or beatings, or death. In all cases, the monks respond that it is the poor person who is dealt with more harshly, and the rich who are often excused. The Buddha concludes, comparing the materially poor in these cases with the spiritually poor—those who are insignificant and miserable, with restricted souls and lives, careless in the discipline of body, habits and thoughts, and who have not developed insight. These, he says, are they who are taken to a hell as the karmic results of even a small action, while the suffering of those who are wealthy in the opposite attributes seems insignificant.<sup>442</sup> In this example the karmic results of a given action are dependent upon the overall character or spiritual attainment of the agent, and not solely upon the particular action or intention.

Thus, we see that although the generation of karma may influence and cause certain conditions of rebirth, it is not seen as the sole cause of one's present condition. Indeed, karma from a previous act, even from a life eons prior, may or may not be the cause of any particular condition, and, therefore, speculation about such direct karmic causation is discouraged. Notwithstanding the seemingly overwhelming number of texts designating karma as the cause of poverty, in the end the case is not entirely clear. Indeed, the doctrine of karma itself seems

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<sup>441</sup> AN 3.99 (Woodward, 2000: 227-231).

<sup>442</sup> AN 3.99 (Woodward, 1932: 227-231).

unclear and at times inconsistent in the Pāli Canon.<sup>443</sup> What is clear is that the Pāli Canon does refer to poverty as a karmic result of one's greed. However, this message should not be overshadowed by the other clear message that poverty can also alternatively arise from other causes. Fenn contends that while karma is repeatedly mentioned as a cause of poverty, in the texts that explicitly deal at length with the particular question of poverty, karma is noticeably absent as its cause.<sup>444</sup> In the popular *Cakkavatti-Sihanāda Sutta* described above, for example, the causes of poverty are specified in detail, but they are purely socio-political.

Because of this complexity and the difficulty in identifying whether karma is the cause of any particular condition, the Buddha discouraged such endeavors, even going so far as to say that they would result in madness.<sup>445</sup> In short, although the realm into which one is reborn is said to be determined by previously generated *karma*, not all other aspects of that rebirth, including poverty or wealth, are necessarily the results of *karma*.

#### 4.2.3.2. Socio-political Causes

Among the cause of poverty identified in the Pāli Canon, a number of key passages refer to socio-political causes, such as poverty which is caused by the actions of rulers. A clear lesson from the previously mentioned *Cakkavatti-Sihanāda Sutta* is that when a King neglects to rule according to the *Dhamma*, and particularly by ignoring duties pertaining to taking care of the poor, the prosperity of the country declines and eventually poverty becomes rampant and

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<sup>443</sup> Fenn, 1991; See also Gombrich, 2009.

<sup>444</sup> Fenn, 1996: 120.

<sup>445</sup> AN 4.77 (Woodward, 1933: 89-90); Wright, 2004: 78.

systemic.<sup>446</sup> Similarly, in the *Kurudhamma-Jātaka* the king is required to live virtuously in order to bring an end to the famine, pestilence, and destitution in his kingdom.<sup>447</sup> In both of these suttas, poverty results from the behavior of the rulers. Furthermore, it is noted that a king might impoverish his subjects by exorbitantly taxing them. For this precise reason kings are included in a list of dire circumstances that obliterate wealth, such as fires, floods, and thieves.<sup>448</sup>

It is also noteworthy that class distinctions, and the resulting distribution of goods that such distinctions cause, are portrayed as the seemingly inevitable outcome of social corruption. Again, in the *Aggañña Sutta*, the Buddha teaches the beginnings of humankind as a series of corruptions which led the primordial beings into human form and activities.<sup>449</sup> The creation of the natural world and social ordering are portrayed as a long history of degeneration as beings become lustful and greedy, leading to more and more differentiation and stratification within society. It is noted that the storing or hoarding of excess goods leads to stealing, lying, and abuse and a lower quality of life for all, and eventually separating society into classes.<sup>450</sup> Again, as in the *Cakkavatti-Sihanāda Sutta*, society begins to progress to a more peaceful and spiritually enlightened state only when a group withdraws from the depraved social structure and its distinctions to undertake meditative practices—representing the influence of the monastic

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<sup>446</sup> DN 26 (Walshe, 1995: 395-405).

<sup>447</sup> Jat 276 (Cowell, 1895b: 251-260). Other passages also point out this connection between the prosperity of a kingdom and the virtue of the king: Jat 544 (Cowell, 1907: 114-126); and, AN 4.70 (Woodward, 1933: 84-85).

<sup>448</sup> AN 5.148 (Woodward, 1933:130).

<sup>449</sup> DN 27 (Walshe, 1995: 407-415).

<sup>450</sup> DN 27 (Walshe, 1995: 410-412).

*saṅgha* on the morality of the broader society.

#### 4.2.3.3. Individual Choice

Karmic merit from previous lives and socio-political conditions do not wholly account for all impoverishment, however. Clearly, one's own actions in this life may also lead to poverty. As I indicated in the previous chapter on Buddhist economics, in the *Sigālaka Sutta*, the Buddha teaches the laity specific principles that would lead one to prosperity. Included in these teachings is the notion that some forms of poverty are the direct result of individual misbehavior. Addiction to alcohol, drugs, or gambling, for instance, leads directly to a loss of wealth and poverty.<sup>451</sup> Additionally, laziness and living beyond one's financial means are also pointed to as causes of the loss of wealth.<sup>452</sup>

This focus on individual behavior is more often the message of the Buddha's approach to karma and the path to enlightenment. The Buddha taught that social distinctions based on the caste that one is born into are not legitimate. One is not noble because of birth or caste, but because one behaves in a noble manner. One's thoughts, words, and deeds make one noble or ignoble.

I do not say, brahmin, that one is better because one is from an aristocratic family, nor do I say that one is worse because one is from an aristocratic family. I do not say that one is better because one is of great beauty, nor do I say that one is worse because one is of

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<sup>451</sup> DN 31 (Walshe, 1995: 462-463).

<sup>452</sup> AN 8.54 (Hare, 1932: 187-191).

great beauty. I do not say that one is better because one is of great wealth, nor do I say that one is worse because one is of great wealth....

"Here, brahmin, one of great beauty ... one of great wealth may kill living beings ... and hold wrong view. Therefore I do not say that one is better because one is of great beauty ... of great wealth. But also, brahmin, one of great beauty ... of great wealth may abstain from killing living beings ... and hold right view. Therefore I do not say that one is worse because one is of great beauty ... of great wealth."<sup>453</sup>

### 4.3. Buddhist Analyses of Poverty

Having outlined the key passages related to poverty, we can now consider the academic approaches to the issue in the writings of Mavis Fenn, David Loy, and Peter Hershock. Mavis Fenn wrote the most comprehensive analysis of the early Buddhist approach to poverty to date in her dissertation on the notions of poverty in the Pāli Canon. Fenn bases her analysis of the notions of poverty on the *Agāṇṇa Sutta* and the *Cakkavatti-Sihanāda Sutta* in the Pāli Canon discussed above.<sup>454</sup> These suttas are two of the most important Buddhist texts concerning poverty and moral obligations related to it. Fenn illustrates the most fundamental beginning point to understanding Buddhist conceptions of poverty—that two notions of poverty are apparent in the Pāli texts: simplicity and deprivation.<sup>455</sup> While the religious elites are encouraged to enter the *saṅgha* and take on a voluntary form of poverty or simplicity, material deprivation is nonetheless

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<sup>453</sup> MN 96: 7-8 (Ñāṇamoli, 1995: 787-788).

<sup>454</sup> DN 27 (Walshe, 1995: 407-415); DN 26 (Walshe, 1995: 395-405).

<sup>455</sup> Fenn, 1994 and 1996.

distinguished from these and designated as detrimental to personal and collective well-being and spiritual development.

Fenn offers an impressive analysis of voluntary poverty in the form of simplicity and its role in the *saṅgha* and traditional Buddhist societies. She employs the concepts of structure and anti-structure, or *communitas*, as defined by the anthropologist Victor Turner, to illustrate the role of the *saṅgha*.<sup>456</sup> By decrying the predominant values which prize personal property and relationships that are based on worldly power, the *saṅgha* models an alternative set of values to the rulers and the laity; the monastic community acts as a living critique of the dominant structure and values and, thereby, fill a role as a sort of conscience for the broader society.<sup>457</sup>

Here Fenn refers to *communitas* as a “feeling of a common human bond with others that arises in liminal situations where structure, characterized by differentiation and hierarchy, is absent or minimal.”<sup>458</sup> In Turner’s view, society is a dialectic process involving a tension between *communitas*, “the undifferentiated community of equal individuals,” and structure, “the differentiated and often hierarchical system of social positions.”<sup>459</sup> In this process, the political rulers and *Brāhmaṇas* are said to represent the structural ideals of family, wealth, status and power; the monastic *saṅgha*, on the other hand is said to represent the ideals of *communitas*, which exemplify an alternative and antipodal set of values that celebrate social and economic

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<sup>456</sup> Turner, 1974 and 1995.

<sup>457</sup> Fenn, 1994: 37-38; Fenn refers to Sarkisyanz, 1965, as an example of Burmese monks acting as a role of public conscience.

<sup>458</sup> Fenn, 1996: 109.

<sup>459</sup> Deflem, 1991: 14-15; Turner 1995.

equality, celibacy, and a simple life of non-attachment and voluntary poverty.<sup>460</sup> Simplicity, therefore, not only plays an important role in personal spiritual progression toward enlightenment, as is often associated with the monastic *saṅgha*, but it is also significant in social and collective well-being as a counterbalance to the dominant and often ego-driven hierarchical structure in society.

Involuntary poverty, or material deprivation, on the other hand, “prevents an individual from participating fully in community life, results in dehumanization that severely restricts, if not destroys, the possibility of spiritual progress.”<sup>461</sup> In essence, impoverishment excludes individuals from the very social behaviors and practices that facilitate enlightenment, and traps them instead in a bestial form of existence in which further degeneration and suffering is the most likely outcome. Furthermore, when poverty becomes widespread it in like manner destroys collective well-being, and leads to the moral degeneration and degradation of the broader community.<sup>462</sup> Fenn’s notion of poverty as deprivation as portrayed in the Pāli Canon is not solely one of material want, but also shares much in common with the capabilities approach to poverty I have outlined, including most notably, the notion of social exclusion, particularly by holding the freedom to pursue one’s own material, personal and spiritual development as the ultimate goal—a goal which is severely impeded by poverty.

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<sup>460</sup> Fenn, 1996: 109-110. This bears certain similarities to the *Brahmānic* versus *Śramānic* ideals outlined in chapter 3.

<sup>461</sup> Fenn, 1996: 1999.

<sup>462</sup> Fenn, 1996: 103-107.

Fenn argues that the *saṅgha* embodies the Buddhist values that stand at odds against the social structure. By embodying the alternative set of values and practices, the *saṅgha* represents a critique of society and its structures. Fenn notes that some texts, such as the *Raṭṭhapāla Sutta*, *Sonaka Jātaka*, and *Kuddāla-Jātaka* seem to reject the social order entirely.<sup>463</sup> The well-known and popular *Aggañña Sutta*, on the other hand, illustrates the social criticism offered by the *saṅgha*, seemingly portraying a transformation of society rather than a rejection of it. The *Aggañña Sutta* tells of two young men who forsake their *Brāhmaṇa* background and lay lives to follow the Buddha as homeless monks.<sup>464</sup> In order to refute the criticisms from the young men's families and friends, the Buddha tells a well-known and influential creation story, referred to above, in which the ancestors of humans descended from a sort of primordial mind-form state. These beings gradually become differentiated from one another as they become greedy and lustful. They eventually become humans, living on earth in family units— all of which is identified as the result of a degeneration from their previous superior forms. The beings live by collecting food each day, but eventually become lazy, begin to hoard food supplies as property rights and a social structure are caused to develop. The formation of society is thus portrayed as a further step toward degeneration. This process of degeneration is halted, however, only when the humans elect a king to protect them and their property from theft and to punish those who break the newly established laws. And, the process only begins to reverse when some of the humans take to meditation and live by collecting offerings from others, which undoubtedly represents the *Śramaṇa* movement generally, and the *saṅgha* in particular. Others, who represent the

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<sup>463</sup> MN 82 (Ñāṇamoli, 1995: 677- 691); Jat 529 (Cowell, 1905:130-131); and Jat 70 (Cowell, 1895: 168-171), respectively.

<sup>464</sup> DN 27 (Walshe, 1995: 407-415).

competitors to the *saṅgha*, the *Brāhmaṇas*, are portrayed as ineffectual at meditation and decide instead to compose books, presumably *Brāhmaṇic* scripture.

In her analysis of the *Aggañña Sutta*, Fenn indicates some important features relating to the *saṅgha* and the concept of poverty.<sup>465</sup> Not only does the text portray wealth and family, and other social distinctions, as forms of degeneration from an ideal state from which humankind originates, but it also implies that the *Brāhmaṇa* and *Śramaṇa* groups both emerge quite naturally as parts of society, and that kingship or government also plays an important role—namely, in establishing a stable society that allows the renouncers to not only survive, but to thrive. Thus, Fenn argues that the text affirms a tension between the values of the dominant social structure and the community of renouncers, revealing the renouncer’s radical social criticism as an alternative set of values and counter-cultural ethic within the structure as opposed to a complete rejection of it. Indeed, as I noted above, the *saṅgha* relies on a safe, stable, and prosperous society to continue their ascetic practices. Voluntary poverty or simplicity, then, is a natural component of a healthy and ideal society.

David Loy presents a Buddhist perspective on the problem of world poverty with an insightful critique of Western notions of development.<sup>466</sup> In *The Great Awakening*, Loy uses Buddhist concepts to analyze the nature of poverty and poverty relief. He notes that material poverty is conceived in early Buddhism as lacking the basic needs of survival; as a source of suffering, material deprivation becomes a concern of the Buddhist teachings.<sup>467</sup> However, because the

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<sup>465</sup> Fenn, 1996: 108-114.

<sup>466</sup> Loy, 2003a: 53-90; and, Loy, 2003b.

<sup>467</sup> Loy, 2003a: 54-57.

Buddhist notion of well-being is a more comprehensive notion that includes eliminating all forms of suffering through moral and mental development, overcoming this form of suffering is not simply a matter of accumulating more goods, as poverty relief is often conceived.<sup>468</sup> Loy addresses Western notions of ‘development’ and ‘underdevelopment’, pointing out deficiencies in common economic measures that project foreign Western notions onto other cultures. In Loy’s view, the Western mind is severely entrapped by a wealth/poverty dualism; preoccupation with development and poverty relief results directly from a preoccupation with economic growth.<sup>469</sup> The conception of development principally as economic growth, Loy suggests, may in fact have exacerbated the problem of world poverty.<sup>470</sup> Loy argues that the problem of poverty is inseparable from the problem of wealth; any accurate analysis of poverty, therefore, must include a critique of the drive for wealth and its effects.<sup>471</sup> This is perhaps one of the most profound insights into poverty that Buddhism contributes to the broader discussion of poverty relief and international development studies today. Increasing accumulation and consumption is likely to correspondingly increase craving and greed—the major sources of suffering in a Buddhist analysis. Loy’s view is perfectly in line with Buddhist analyses of the sources of suffering in stating that the final goal of true development, correctly conceived, can only occur through transforming greed into generosity; ill-will or hatred into compassion; and, delusion or ignorance into wisdom.<sup>472</sup> In this view, poverty is not primarily the natural or inevitable result of economic failure, but rather of a moral failure. Overconsumption of goods and resources among wealthy

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<sup>468</sup> Loy, 2003a: 57-58.

<sup>469</sup> Loy, 2003a: 62.

<sup>470</sup> Loy, 2003b.

<sup>471</sup> Loy, 2003b: 10-11.

<sup>472</sup> Loy, 2003b:10.

nations is just as much a part of the problem as is deprivation in the poorer nations. A narrow focus on production and consumption as the goals of development falls prey to increases in income and wealth inequalities that may push many people further into poverty even while raising some few out of it.

Rejecting what he sees as having been the broad goal of common economic policies in poverty relief projects over the last several decades, as being primarily to integrate the poor to a greater degree into the established global economy, Loy instead defines the appropriate goal as re-embedding the broader economy in social relationships and local cultural values.<sup>473</sup> By doing so, it seems, material accumulation and growth will not dominate the focus, overshadowing local values and understandings of well-being. In place of imposing alien notions of wealth and poverty on local communities, such a project of re-embedding would allow individuals and communities to determine for themselves the meaning of well-being and wealth, based on their own cultural values, while remaining focused on the healthy social relationships that form the foundation of a healthy society and economy. Loy notes that the characteristic Buddhist response to poverty is the key Buddhist virtue of *dāna*; generosity is a virtue that promotes fundamental social relationships essential to a thriving community or economy. Echoing the views of Singer and Pogge, Loy adds that there are already enough resources available to provide for the world's poor, if only there also existed the collective will to do so.<sup>474</sup>

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<sup>473</sup> Loy, 2003a: 68; and, 2003b:11-12. Here Loy's approach evinces significant similarities to Karl Polanyi's analysis of capitalism, which also speaks to the need to re-embed the economy locally. See Polanyi, 1944.

<sup>474</sup> Loy, 2003a: 76, 70-71. See also Pogge, 2011; and Singer, 2009.

Peter Hershock has also made some important contributions to the undertaking of analyzing poverty in light of Buddhist insights. He addressed the questions of what a Buddhist conception of poverty and what a genuinely Buddhist approach to poverty relief might look like, relying largely on the well-known *Cakkavatti-Sihanāda Sutta* as well as the extremely popular Mahāyāna *Lotus Sūtra*.<sup>475</sup> Hershock's conception of poverty is a primarily relational one; this view relies on the Buddhist teachings of non-self and interdependent co-arising.<sup>476</sup> That is to say that his model rejects the notion that poverty can be defined on an individual basis, but rather that poverty must be understood in terms of the entire complex system or processes that contribute to impoverishment.

As Hershock expresses it:

Insofar as poverty, like all things—our own selves included—arises as a particular complexion of always dynamic and ultimately horizonless relationships, poverty cannot arise without our being implicated in it. Poverty does *not* consist of a particular state of affairs into which we as individuals or groups can, on tragic occasion, find ourselves to have fallen. Rather, poverty is an *eventuality* that expresses a particular inflection (or perhaps, distortion) of an abiding pattern of relationships. It marks a persisting confluence of conditions conducive to a distinctive, and at times locally quite intense, quality and

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<sup>475</sup> Hershock, 2004; DN 26 (Walshe, 1995: 395-405); and Reeves, 2008; See also, Hershock, 2006 and 2008. I will return to Hershock's reading of the *Lotus Sūtra* in the following chapter as it deals directly with poverty relief efforts.

<sup>476</sup> Hershock, 2008: 115-134.

orientation of interdependence.<sup>477</sup>

He continues:

Most generally stated, poverty marks the persistence of an increasingly constraining relational pattern – a relational dynamic that is qualitatively stagnant or degrading. Poverty is not something occurring *in* a given situation, afflicting only some specific person or people. It signals a distinctive meaning or heading *of* a situation— a heading that is not spatial, but qualitative. Poverty *means* a persistent situational depreciation eventuating in all present becoming less and less valuably situated, but also less and less able to relate in ways that are appreciative or capable of both valuing and adding value to their situation.<sup>478</sup>

Hershock notes that, in addition to other cultures and traditions, this notion of interdependence and inter-relatedness is evident in Buddhist thought.<sup>479</sup> Indeed, it is central to a Buddhist perspective, and is particularly insightful in portraying a clear Buddhist conception of the phenomena of poverty, but it is not a uniquely Buddhist idea and the analysis he presents of poverty is a useful one for the larger development community.

Hershock exemplifies the strength of a Buddhist analysis of poverty: poverty is not merely a problem for one socio-economic group within a society—the poor—but for all of the society as whole, all of which has not only contributed in some way to the generation of the phenomenon of

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<sup>477</sup> Hershock, 2008: 119.

<sup>478</sup> Ibid.

<sup>479</sup> Hershock, 2008: 118.

impoverishment, but also suffers in some way because of it. While some elite minority group may seem to benefit from increasing and even extravagant wealth, there is good evidence to suggest that the wider the income and wealth gap becomes in a given society, the worse off everyone—even the wealthy— become in terms of overall health and well-being. Richard Wilkinson, for example, has compiled evidence from governmental and development organizations around the world over a thirty year period that suggest that societies that are more equal in terms of a smaller gap between the wealthiest and the poorest also exhibit better outcomes in a wide variety of measures, including satisfying community and social relationships, mental health and substance abuse, physical health and fitness, life expectancy, teenage births, violence and imprisonment, and social mobility.<sup>480</sup> These lower outcomes and lower levels of overall satisfaction are not only a problem for the socioeconomic groups at the lowest end of the income and wealth scale, although they likely experience it the most intensely, but are experienced by virtually all members of society to some degree. So, in the end, the notion here is less about shifting focus away from individual well-being to a broader notion of societal well-being, but rather recognizing an expanded notion of well-being which recognizes that individual well-being is in fact intimately tied to and conditioned by societal well-being through a vast complex of relationships.

Hershock identifies the Buddhist concern with non-dualistic modes of thought as a genuinely Buddhist contribution to poverty relief which undermines the dualism of the notions that often muddle the discussion, such as ‘poverty’ and ‘wealth’, ‘rich’ and ‘poor’, ‘developed’ or ‘undeveloped’, or ‘us’ and ‘them’. Cultivating this wisdom allows for a clearer conception of the

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<sup>480</sup> Wilkinson, 2009.

complex issues related to poverty as well as a greater compassion and generosity to enlarge within individuals and society at large, leading to a more committed engagement with the sources of suffering that cause material deprivation.

While Fenn, Loy, and Hershock base their analyses of poverty on canonical texts, they also expand their analyses by including certain key Buddhist doctrines that developed over many years after the Pāli Canon was comprised, and applied the teachings directly to the issue rather than primarily searching for texts that deal directly with poverty; all of these present clear analyses that contribute significant advances toward an understanding of a Buddhist analysis of poverty. All of these approaches are grounded firmly in Buddhist thought and can be found in some form in Buddhist scripture and texts.

#### **4.4. Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter has been to address Buddhist conceptions of poverty, focusing primarily on the Pāli Canon, the most complete extant collection of early Buddhist texts, and expanding the scope to include Mahāyāna sources as well as contemporary academic approaches. I began with a general discussion of the categories often employed in poverty studies in order to present a systematic approach and provide a theoretical structure with which we might better understand the Buddhist conceptions of poverty. I indicated that while the descriptions of poverty often fit within the framework of the absolute approach to poverty outlined by Beaudoin, the notion of poverty as relational, interdependent, and as playing a role in both individual and collective well-being, also significantly overlaps with contemporary capabilities approaches, including the Subjective Well-Being approach to poverty and the notion

of social exclusion.

I presented the teachings on poverty that form the foundation of a Buddhist approach to conceptions of poverty found in the Pāli Canon. I also expanded on these passages and on Fenn's approach by including more Pāli suttas as well as various later Mahāyāna sūtras, thereby showing a broader consensus among the major schools of Buddhism. These passages of scripture identify the earliest known and most common Buddhist notions of poverty and wealth, including their various causes and effects, and outline duties for dealing with poverty.

The key previous academic writings on poverty and significant passages from Buddhist scripture related to poverty demonstrate that poverty is portrayed as both a virtue and a vice. As the ideal of non-attachment, simplicity, it is described as a step in the path to liberation; but, as deprivation, it is also a source of profound suffering on an individual and collective level, a possible hindrance to spiritual development, and when it advances to a systemic level, it becomes a cause of moral decay in society. By undertaking this form of voluntary poverty, the *saṅgha* embodies a counter-cultural ethic, serving as moral exemplars by embodying and modeling an alternative set of values that place a higher value on spiritual development than on material goods. The *saṅgha* comes to stand in direct opposition to the more typical power values of class, wealth, and political standing, giving priority instead to spiritual attainment—namely in overcoming attachment, hatred and delusion.

The notion of poverty that emerges is inter-relational and interdependent, as a dynamic process that includes not only those who are impoverished, but also the entire system of processes that have broken down to create impoverishment, as indicated by Herschok; individuals and society

at large influence one another in their economic, spiritual, social and moral pursuits. Poverty is also defined in a qualitative fashion here. Presumably there will always be those who have less than others, as a result of a diversity of causes, but the point of concern is how little they have and how they suffer as a result of it. Hershock's approach stands as a strong critique of the entire globalized system that has a part in creating this phenomenon of extreme poverty. The enormous gap in income and wealth between the richest and the poorest, and the plain fact that tens of thousands of small children die daily of starvation, or related and preventable illnesses, present a clear indictment of a systemic failure of the entire process—one that correspondingly creates enormous wealth and overconsumption at one extreme and brutal poverty and starvation at the other. As a relational process, the notions of poverty outlined in the Pāli Canon denote a diversity of inter-related causes, including karmic, socio-political or structural, and behavioral causes. While karma is identified as a cause of poverty, it is not a fatalistic view; in the end, those who find themselves in poverty are encouraged to escape from it, and not merely to accept it as their lot in life.

Having outlined a Buddhist approach to poverty, in the chapter that follows, I will address Buddhist conceptions of poverty relief. This will include a survey of Pāli Canonical passages that indicate the duties to relieve poverty, as well as some important Mahāyāna developments concerning both the centrality of the obligation to relieve poverty and descriptions of the manner in which it ought to be done. This will provide a theoretical framework that might be used in formulating a genuinely Buddhist approach to poverty relief, which I will then explore through examination of certain poverty alleviation projects in the history of the Buddhist tradition and in the contemporary Socially Engaged Buddhist movement.

## 5. Poverty Relief

The previous chapters have established the general role of ethics in the Buddhist path to enlightenment, and the conceptions of poverty and wealth in Buddhist thought. This chapter will now directly address the moral demand for poverty relief in Buddhist social ethics by first detailing the duties of the major social groups to relieve poverty as outlined in the Pāli Canon. I will then describe the duty to relieve poverty and the conception of poverty relief that emerges from certain well-known Mahāyāna sūtras that are representative of the tradition, as well as how these characteristically Buddhist notions of poverty relief have been exemplified in Buddhist history and in contemporary Socially Engaged Buddhist poverty relief projects.

### 5.1. Social Duties to Relieve Poverty

The duty to relieve poverty in Buddhist social ethics is grounded in two main notions that I outlined above: first, material deprivation is a significant source of dire suffering; and, second, generosity and compassion toward the poor constitute key virtuous behaviors that can be cultivated as one advances on the path toward enlightenment. I introduced the topic of this dissertation by making reference to two leading ethicists who have proclaimed the moral responsibility to alleviate the suffering caused by extreme poverty—Thomas Pogge and Peter Singer. While they both agree that humankind has a moral responsibility to the world's poor, their approaches are grounded in different concerns. Pogge, for example approaches the moral responsibility to the poor in terms of human rights. Turning more common discussions of welfare and foreign aid on their head, Pogge asks what right the wealthy have to take possession of such

a disproportionately large portion of the earth's resources.<sup>481</sup> In Pogge's view, the poor have a legitimate claim to the goods and resources required for their survival, and extreme poverty is then presented as a denial of this most basic of human rights. Peter Singer, on the other hand, grounds his approach to the moral responsibility to the poor in a Utilitarian ethic. If we can prevent the severe suffering and death of the world's poor by sacrificing some good without causing ourselves or others to suffer equally, then we are morally bound to do so.<sup>482</sup> In the complex mathematics of suffering, simply giving up the satisfaction or pleasure we might receive from some unnecessary or luxury goods can reduce the collective and individual suffering and death, and we are, therefore, morally bound to do so. Briefly considering these approaches of Pogge and Singer helps us clarify the Buddhist approach as it bears some similarities with both of these approaches.

From a Buddhist perspective, the notion of human rights is problematic. While the Buddhist tradition is not opposed to human rights, and it certainly opposes persecution and discrimination on principle, the Western notion of human rights is somewhat foreign to the tradition.<sup>483</sup> Perhaps most significantly this is due to the fact that the Buddhist non-self teaching complicates the task of locating the source of any such rights. However, Pogge's notion of poverty as a denial of a basic human right is very much in line with the notion of material poverty as a form of social exclusion and a deprivation of the most basic requirements for progression toward enlightenment, even if the language of rights may seem foreign. If it is the case that the basic

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<sup>481</sup> See Pogge, 2007, for a presentation of this approach by Pogge and others.

<sup>482</sup> Singer, 2009.

<sup>483</sup> For discussions of the key issues see Schmidt-Leukel, 2006a; Keown, 1998; and, Harvey, 2000: 118-122.

requirements for a simple but relatively comfortable existence are essential for one to be prepared to even hear the Buddha's message, then causing or even allowing others to lack those necessary basic requirements constitutes a deprivation of the most vital necessities for living a meaningful life.

Singer's utilitarian approach of weighing the heavy costs of suffering against the relatively minor and fleeting pleasures of comfort and luxury, does resonate with the Buddhist Middle Path and the foundation of Buddhist economic ethics. Material wealth can only provide so much pleasure in removing unnecessary suffering; at some point it no longer contributes to the same increases in genuine happiness and well-being, but may in fact detract from it, causing some level of suffering to oneself and others. There is something fundamentally utilitarian in this approach.

As I have noted, the main concern of the Buddhist tradition is the overcoming of all forms of suffering; extreme poverty is, therefore, a concern because it represents a specific, and particularly severe form of suffering, a form that also substantially prevents one from advancing on the path to enlightenment. If the ultimate goal in Buddhism is the transcendence of all forms of suffering, then Buddhists necessarily must be concerned with the suffering of the poor. Keown has argued that while it also bears some similarities with other Western ethical theories, Buddhist ethics can be best understood as a form of virtue ethics.<sup>484</sup> It should be clear at this point that the virtues of generosity and compassion form the foundation of a Buddhist social ethic of poverty

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<sup>484</sup> Keown, 1992: 1-24. This approach has been criticized by Maria Heim as an oversimplification of a complex tradition. See Heim, 2011. Even if it is not wholly or primarily a virtue ethic, it does nonetheless exhibit some of these qualities in some of its forms and remains a helpful way to highlight the issue here.

relief. Cultivating these virtues, as well as perfecting the other key virtues, constitutes the path to liberation. In short, one should reduce or eliminate the suffering of the poor because this is simply what an enlightened being does. Cultivating these virtues not only eliminates the sources of one's own suffering, but also requires one to act to eliminate the suffering of others as well. Such compassionate and generous behaviors move one closer toward Buddhahood or *arahatship*. Harvey has noted that, while Buddhist ethics are not duty-based in the Kantian sense, we can nevertheless refer to duties in the sense that there are certain things that individuals ought to do in order to promote the satisfaction and happiness of oneself and others.<sup>485</sup> In what follows, I will outline such key duties in regards to poverty relief.

A helpful way to conceptualize the ethics of poverty relief in the Buddhist tradition is to examine the social roles as they relate to poverty relief. The Pāli Canon and various Mahāyāna sūtras contain numerous references to poverty relief efforts among the key social groups I outlined above in reference to social theory. Some of these passages are descriptive, indicating the manner in which some early Buddhist followers applied the Buddhist message in a social context, while more importantly, other passages are prescriptive or normative, indicating the ideal or proper roles or duties of the major social groups in this regard. These passages reveal that poverty is not only described as a clear social evil, but one that everyone has some part in removing; the political rulers, the *saṅgha*, and the laity all have clear duties regarding the alleviation of poverty.

The chapter begins with a focus on passages in the Pāli Canon, which demonstrate a clear distinction between the social roles and corresponding duties among these social groupings. The

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<sup>485</sup> Harvey, 2000: 50-51.

Mahāyāna texts are addressed later, not because they indicate a lower priority among the social roles related to poverty—indeed the opposite is arguably the case—but because they tend to blur these distinctions between the social groupings as a result of the development of the *bodhisattva* ideal, thereby making a duty to directly relieve the material suffering of the poor and needy more clearly incumbent upon all who strive for enlightenment.

### 5.1.1. The Role of Kings/Government

As we have seen previously in the outline of Buddhist social ethics, the primary duties of the king outlined in Buddhist scriptures include the provision of a safe society and stable economy. Part of these duties is expressly identified as a concern for the poor and the relief of poverty. The ideal ruler is explicitly charged, for example, with distribution of wealth specifically to the aid of the poor.<sup>486</sup> In the *Kūṭadanta Sutta*, the king is instructed to fulfill his duty to provide a safe society, free from crime and other social ills, as a prerequisite to receiving any benefits from offering sacrifice, and is further encouraged to do this by practicing the Buddhist virtue of giving. The relief of poverty is connected to the very activities best known for generating karmic merit—the practice of giving or *dāna*. Here we see that giving to the poor and the *saṅgha* is specified as the supreme offering by the king.<sup>487</sup> Through a story of how, in a past rebirth, he had advised a king, the Buddha teaches the king that only the act of giving to his subjects could successfully remove the plague of thievery besetting the kingdom. More specifically, he tells how in the past life he had instructed the king to give grain and fodder, capital, and proper living

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<sup>486</sup> DN 26 (Walshe 1995: 395-405); DN 5 (Walshe 1995: 133-141).

<sup>487</sup> DN 5 (Walshe 1995: 133-141).

wages to subjects in his kingdom. Once the king had taken these efforts to establish economic justice and prosperity, the narrative concludes, the plague of thieves was removed.

Buddhist scripture and canonical texts consistently assert this concern for the poor and the provision of material goods and property for their welfare as primarily the duty of the king, although we shall soon see that the lay followers are also encouraged to give to the poor, and even the *saṅgha* contributes to the poor despite their own individual possessionlessness.

Returning once again to one of the most important passages concerning poverty in the Pāli Canon, the *Cakkavatti-Sihanāda Sutta* also identifies poverty as a cause of immoral behavior of individuals, to a wider range of social ills, and also directly relates the behavior of the king to the spread of poverty and other social ills.<sup>488</sup> As I indicated in the previous chapter, the Buddha relates all of the resultant social deterioration and dehumanizing behavior back to the king's initial failure to provide for the poor:

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 – and from the taking of life, people's lifespan decreased, their beauty decreased. . . .”

Within the social structure outlined in the Pāli Canon, a king's primary duty above all else is to provide a safe and stable society conducive to the pursuit of enlightenment. The message of the sutta could not be made clearer and cannot be overemphasized here. One of the principle ways that a king fulfills this fundamental duty is through giving to the poor in order to prevent poverty

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<sup>488</sup> DN 26 (Walshe 1995: 395-405).

from reaching the systemic levels of impoverishment and the resulting moral decay. The duty to relieve poverty as outlined in the Pāli Canon falls first and foremost to the rulers. They are to lead efforts to relieve poverty by establishing a prosperous society and by implementing targeted welfare or charity to individuals in need. Again, this role is complicated in the contemporary world in which citizens often have a significant influence over the policies that their governments pursue, particularly in democratic societies, and in a global economy in which multinational corporations also exert significant influence on international and local policies; this duty of rulers, then ought to be broadly construed to include all those who have an influence over ruling bodies.

Moreover, as the king is the chief and most influential lay person in the land, it is incumbent on him to live up to the Buddhist ideal and be one who sets the example for the laity to follow. This requirement to set a virtuous example expressly relates to conditions of poverty. In the *Kurudhamma Jātaka*, for example, the king is required to live virtuously precisely in order to bring an end to the famine, pestilence, and destitution in his kingdom.<sup>489</sup> The *Gaṇḍatindu Jātaka* similarly proclaims the king's duty to his subjects to rule righteously and draws a connection between the virtue of the king and the kingdom's prosperity.<sup>490</sup> King Pañcāla ruled his kingdom unrighteously, at least part of which meant oppressing his subjects with heavy taxation, and as a result they fled to live in the woods where they were attacked by thieves. The king is then instructed to begin to rule righteously. In the king's defense, his priest says that the king cannot be held responsible for the wellbeing of each and every individual in his kingdom, but the priest

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<sup>489</sup> Jat 276 (Cowell 1895b: 251-259).

<sup>490</sup> Jat 520 (Cowell, 1905: 54-58).

is swiftly rebuked by a *bodhisattva* for this incorrect teaching.<sup>491</sup> Clearly, the king is held responsible for the wellbeing of everyone within his kingdom, and just as clearly, the king is to accomplish this, at least in part, by exemplifying generosity through the act of giving to the poor. An additional message of this sutta is that the rulers should consider the needs of the poor when formulating tax policies.

The Pāli Canon is replete with examples of generosity directed toward the poor in the form of material goods given by the king, and these examples are often normative instructions to the rulers. The *Mahānārada-kassapa Jātaka* contains instructions to a wicked king that he should provide food and drink, garments, and jewels to those in need if he is to escape hell and be reborn into a heaven.<sup>492</sup> In the *Mahāsudassana Sutta* the Buddha describes one of his previous lives in which he had been a *Cakkavatti* ruler, or ideal monarch, in a gloriously prosperous and wealthy city, exemplifying righteous ruling.<sup>493</sup> As king he provided food and drink, clothing, transportation, dwellings, wives, and gold for those who were in need.<sup>494</sup> When his subjects brought great wealth to present to the king, he returned it to them with more besides.<sup>495</sup> He is said to have gained a good rebirth as a result of having so exemplified Buddhist teachings. In another similar passage, the deva Serī describes a past life as a generous king, donor, and philanthropist who spoke often in praise of giving, and facilitated the act of giving by all those in his household and kingdom. He gave half of his revenue to monks and brahmins, paupers and

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<sup>491</sup> Jat 520 (Cowell, 1905: 58).

<sup>492</sup> Jat 544 (Cowell 1907: 114-125).

<sup>493</sup> DN 17 (Walshe 1995:279-280).

<sup>494</sup> DN 17 (Walshe 1995: 283-284).

<sup>495</sup> DN 17 (Walshe 1995: 284).

cripples, wayfarers and beggars. Serī rejoices to the Buddha in the merit he gained from these actions that resulted in his rebirth in heaven.<sup>496</sup>

In addition to providing direct material support, rulers have also been instructed to protect the poor by ensuring that taxes are not too burdensome.<sup>497</sup> In the *Rājaparīkathā-ratnamālā*, for example, the prominent Mahāyāna philosopher Nāgārjuna advised the king Udayi to give priority to the poor and otherwise needy:

Cause the blind, the sick, the lowly,  
 The protectorless, the wretched  
 And the crippled equally to attain  
 Food and drink without interruption.  
 Provide all types of support  
 For practitioners who do not seek it  
 And even for those living  
 In the realms of other kings.<sup>498</sup>

In addition:

Provide extensive care  
 For the persecuted, the victims [of disasters],  
 The stricken and diseased,

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<sup>496</sup> SN 2:23 (Bodhi, 2000: 154-156).

<sup>497</sup> Harvey, 2000: 198-201. See also, Mvs. I: 276 (Jones, 1949: 229).

<sup>498</sup> RR 4:320-321 (Hopkins, 1987: 159).

And for the worldly beings in conquered areas.<sup>499</sup>

He also advocates providing:

stricken farmers

With seeds and sustenance,

Eliminate high taxes

By reducing their rate.

Protect [the poor] from the pain of wanting [your wealth],

Set up no [new] tolls and reduce those [that are heavy],

Free them from the suffering [that follows when

The tax collector] is waiting at the door.<sup>500</sup>

In summary, the kings or rulers have clearly outlined duties regarding the poor. They are primarily charged with preventing poverty and the social ills it brings. They are to set an example of generosity toward the poor through a comprehensive targeted approach; they are to give due consideration to the poor in formulating policies, such as regarding taxation; and, they are to give material goods necessary for the sustenance of the poor, as well as to promote business ventures that will provide future financial stability to the poor and their families.

### 5.1.2. The Role of the Laity

As I demonstrated in the previous chapter on Buddhist economics, the instructions to the lay followers found in the Pāli Canon include remarkably detailed instructions concerning the

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<sup>499</sup> RR 3:251 (Hopkins, 1987: 148).

<sup>500</sup> RR 3:252-253 (Hopkins, 1987: 148); Harvey, 2000: 199.

manner in which income is to be earned and distributed, both of which have direct bearing on issues of poverty and poverty relief. The lay followers are primarily to eliminate poverty by industriously engaging themselves in earning an income through ethical, lawful and wise means, and to use the wealth they earn to benefit themselves, their families and friends, and others in society. Such pursuits allow them to avoid or to bring themselves out of poverty, and to undertake activities which help to relieve the suffering of others and improve the overall quality of life in their community as well.

However, in addition to supporting their own families, the laity also has a duty to help others out of poverty. A part of earning an income in a virtuous manner is avoiding activities which take advantage of, or otherwise oppress others. In the aforementioned *Sigālaka Sutta*, the Buddha teaches that employers should have a general concern for the welfare of their employees, their health and happiness, and that they should be sure to at least pay what we might today call a living wage. In essence, employees should be able to provide for their own needs and the needs of their families through their labor.<sup>501</sup> While the Pāli texts seem to place the greatest burden for preventing and relieving poverty, in the modern world, the duties of the lay-followers are expanded in democratic states where the rulers or government officials are more obligated to fulfill the will of the people. In such states, the lay-followers are in a position of far greater authority and have greater responsibility to ensure that others are not exploited or left to suffer in their impoverished conditions when government policies or programs could more effectively help. Furthermore, lay business leaders have far greater influence on policies that directly affect laborers at a global level than has typically been the case in the past.

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<sup>501</sup> DN 31:32 (Walshe, 1995: 468).

Individual industry and entrepreneurial spirit are also repeatedly praised in the Pāli Canon, particularly as a path to freedom from poverty. In the *Cullaka-Setṭhi Jātaka*, the Buddha teaches a group of monks that he has helped a disciple rise to “great things in the Faith” as he had likewise previously helped him rise to great wealth in a past life.<sup>502</sup> A clear message of this tale is that poor people have the ability to raise themselves out of impoverished circumstances and the Buddha offers praise for such efforts. Economic circumstances or class are not unchangeable nor are they simply fate. The Jātaka relates a narrative in which a young man overhears the king's treasurer make a passing comment about how a dead mouse on the street could be enough for someone to start a business which would support a small family. In an example of the modern spirit of micro-enterprise, the poor young man sells the dead mouse as food for a cat, continually using any proceeds for additional and greater entrepreneurial endeavors which provide needed services for others in exchange for more money, goods, or other favors. Through his blend of wisdom, generosity, and hard work, this poor young man quickly becomes very wealthy, raises a family, and eventually becomes the king's treasurer.<sup>503</sup> Such industry, ingenuity, and entrepreneurial skills are consistently praised in Buddhist scriptures and are key examples of an ideal based on the principle that the poor often may still have the capacity to raise themselves out of poverty. Coupled with the efforts of the king to establish a prosperous society in which one has the opportunities and basic requirements to encourage or allow wealth creation among the different social groupings, this entrepreneurial spirit and industriousness can both prevent and bring an end to individual impoverishment. The notion that Buddhist thought is at odds with an entrepreneurial drive or industriousness, appears incongruous with these texts.

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<sup>502</sup> Jat 4 (Cowell, 1895a: 14-20).

<sup>503</sup> Ibid.

The Buddha also taught that generosity and giving are fundamental to the ideal lay life. While it is often noted that the lay followers are primarily to give to the *saṅgha*, they are also encouraged to cultivate generosity through giving to others. He taught the householder Anāthapiṇḍika that the perfection of generosity, or having a heart free of stinginess and delighting in giving charitable gifts, leads one to obtaining certain desirable conditions which includes wealth for oneself and one's family and friends. One is said to seize opportunities and turn them to merit when wealth is used to make family and friends secure and happy, and offerings are given to relatives, guests, deceased relatives, kings and gods.<sup>504</sup> This provides a clear motivation to the laity to make charitable contributions, not only to the *saṅgha*, but also to others in need. In the *Ghaṭikāra Sutta*, Ghaṭikāra the potter receives a great benefit by generously giving his wares away for free. In return he was supported by the king and his neighbors.<sup>505</sup> Ghaṭikāra is praised for his generosity and for looking after his blind parents and also attending upon Kassapa Buddha with complete reverence.

However, it should be noted that the duty to give to the poor is taught with some ambivalence; the lay followers are taught in the Pāli Canon that they will gain more merit by giving to the *saṅgha* because they are more worthy of charity than the poor lay followers. For example, the *Āditta Jātaka* draws a distinction between the types of poor people who receive charity in the story of the virtuous king Bharata who gave great gifts to the poor, wayfarers, beggars, and the like. The king became displeased that his alms-house was full of greedy people who were

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<sup>504</sup> AN 2:61 (Woodward, 1933: 76).

<sup>505</sup> MN 81 (Ñāṇamoli, 1995: 669-676); MN Commentary, Sutta 81.794-5 (Ñāṇamoli, 1995:1286).

devouring his alms and sought out the more virtuous *paccekabuddhas* instead to receive his offerings without greed. The implication here is that it is better to give charity to those who are virtuous, namely the religious mendicants, than to give charity to the destitute who are still thought to likely be caught up in greed. Nevertheless, as I have noted, there are passages that also clearly indicate that one should give to the poor in addition to the *saṅgha*. But, this notion that the poor are not as worthy recipients as is the *saṅgha* is not universally held.

In addition to giving to needy individuals, the lay followers are also encouraged to engage themselves in activities that improve their community and society at large in order to support family, friends, the *saṅgha* and the poor. This implies that rather than solely being concerned with needy individuals that one may know personally, relieving poverty at a systemic level should also be a priority. The well-known *Kulāvaka Jātaka* clearly illustrates this through the tale of a young man named Magha, who exemplified a pious Buddhist layman.<sup>506</sup> Recognizing that his efforts to improve the community would bring happiness, merit, and that he in fact had a duty to make such labor, Magha began building improvements in a town, which led to a social development program based on cooperation in his community. Seeing his example, more and more others joined with Magha in the improvements. They undertook projects to improve the quality of life in their community, such as building a community house, constructing roads, and irrigation systems, and supporting the needy. Magha is described as having such moral or spiritual power that when corrupt and scheming leaders tried to have Magha put to death on false charges, the order could not be carried out. The elephants which were ordered to trample and crush Magha refused to do so. Eventually Magha was taken before the king and was able to teach

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<sup>506</sup> Jat 31 (Cowell, 1895a: 76-82); and, DTK 2.7b (Burlingame, 1921a: 315-324).

the king to follow the Buddhist precepts; the king eventually joined with him to engage in additional social improvement projects. Similarly, in the *Planter of Groves* sutta, the Buddha also taught that those who engage in public works such as building parks, groves, bridges, places to drink and wells, and who give residences are established in *Dhamma*, endowed with virtue, and will always increase in merit, and go to a heaven.<sup>507</sup> The sorts of improvement projects praised in these texts are all undertaken without order or other prompting, simply for the good of others in society.

Thus, the duties of the lay followers concerning poverty are: first of all, to remain industrious and wise in business in order to keep oneself and one's family out of debt and poverty; second, they are to use the income they have earned in a lawful and virtuous manner for the benefit of family and community and exert their influence to ensure that others are treated in an ethical manner in the public sphere. This includes donations to the *saṅgha* and generous giving to others in need, as well as cooperative community and social improvement programs that address poverty on both systemic and individual levels.

### **5.1.3. The Role of the *Saṅgha***

I have noted that the duties of the *saṅgha* concerning poverty that are outlined in the Pāli Canon include setting an example of the appropriate moral values by undertaking vows of poverty, in the form of simplicity and homelessness for themselves, receiving charitable donations from the laity and the rulers in order to allow them to benefit from the karmic merit and develop generosity, and instructing the laity and rulers in the living according to the *Dhamma* so that

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<sup>507</sup> SN 1:47 (Bodhi, 2000: 122-123).

individuals and society can prosper and develop spiritually. However, although the highest and most valuable offering of the *saṅgha* is understood to be the instruction in the *Dhamma*, this does not preclude the additional giving of material goods as well, which seems to have often occurred in Buddhist communities since the earliest times.

Much as the king is to set an example for the laity, the *saṅgha* also is to teach by example, instructing in living the *Dhamma* principles—particularly in promoting the virtue of generosity. Examples from the Pāli Canon of the centrality of an ascetic or homeless life to one's spiritual development or liberation have been presented above, as have examples which indicated the role that monks play in instructing the kings in how they might rule righteously. In virtually all cases noted above, the kings who remove plagues, famines, and other social ills from their kingdoms do so by following the advice of a monk or ascetic counterpart. It is first and foremost by teaching the rulers and laity to live according to the moral demands of the *Dhamma* that monks contribute to the establishment of justice and prosperity in society.

In addition to contributing to the prosperity and spiritual development of individuals and society by acting as exemplars and a conscience of society by living the *Dhamma* and modeling alternative values, the *saṅgha* act as fields of merit in receiving gifts from the laity. The *saṅgha* are specifically instructed to target poor communities primarily in order to allow the poor the benefits of giving as a means of removing themselves from poverty either in this life or a future life. The poor lay followers generate no less karmic merit by giving whatever small gift they can to the *saṅgha* than do the wealthy who give large gifts. An example of the karmic merit generated from charitable giving to the *saṅgha* as a way of eliminating poverty is found in the *Kuṇḍaka Kucchi Sindhava Jātaka*. The Elder monk Sāriputta rescues a woman from poverty by

accepting an invitation to dine at her door.<sup>508</sup> The poor elderly woman asked the clerk to send a monk to her home so she might offer dinner, but all the monks except for Sāriputta had already been assigned to other homes for dinner. When word spread that the well-known and honored Sāriputta would be dining with the poor woman, the king and other impressed neighbors send money to her home to buy food, clothing, and entertainment. So much money is sent to her on that day that she becomes wealthy. Her reward is said to be both physical and spiritual as she is edified and converted by the kindness and gratitude of Sāriputta. The message seems to be that giving to the *saṅgha* at least indirectly helps the poor, and even the poor can benefit from their own generosity toward the *saṅgha*.

But the members of the *saṅgha* may also make direct contributions to the poor as well. A noteworthy passage concerning charitable giving of a monk to the poor is found in the *Sāma Jātaka* which tells of parents who are thrust from wealth into extreme poverty because their son enters the *saṅgha*.<sup>509</sup> Upon hearing that this has happened to his beloved parents, the monk considers leaving the *saṅgha* to become a householder and provide for his parents. Instead, he determines to use the alms that he receives to support them, thereby remaining faithful to his vow of entering the *saṅgha*. The significant point here, though, is that giving away alms food is customarily considered prohibited. After some time, another monk finds that he has been giving his alms to his parents who are lay followers. He explains that it is unlawful to waste the alms of the faithful by giving them to lay followers, and he reports it to the Buddha. The young monk is thereby made to feel ashamed of what he has done. But, rather than reprimand him, the Buddha

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<sup>508</sup> Jat 254 (Cowell, 1895b: 199-202).

<sup>509</sup> Jat 540 (Cowell, 1907: 38-52).

instead repeatedly praises him for his actions. In fact, the Buddha tells him that he had also provided for his parents in a like manner by making rounds asking for alms in a previous life.<sup>510</sup> An implication here is that, although it is widely recognized that monks remove themselves from conventional society upon joining the *saṅgha*, they do not necessarily wholly remove themselves from all societal and familial obligations and they appear to still receive some spiritual benefit from taking care of others in society. The common assumption that initiates to the *saṅgha* relinquish social obligations to family and others is challenged by this narrative. While we may not be able to make the strong claim that monks have the obligation to provide for the material needs of others from the alms they receive, this narrative at least supports a weaker claim that such behavior is praiseworthy and even encouraged—and in at least some instances, such actions were both praised and said to have been performed by the Buddha himself. What is absolutely clear is that they are to exemplify *dāna* by giving to others and encouraging others to give; we shall also see more clearly in the development of the Mahāyāna approach that they have also acted as providers for the poor.

## 5.2. Poverty Relief in the Mahāyāna

The duty of rulers, monks, and lay followers in Mahāyāna texts bears numerous similarities to those outlined in the Pāli Canon. A significant divergence occurs, however, as a result of the development of the *bodhisattva* ideal. Rulers, for example, receive similar counsel relating to providing for the poor in their kingdoms as appears in the Pāli Canon, and yet these duties are enriched and amplified when the ruler takes on *bodhisattva* vows to end the suffering of all

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<sup>510</sup> Jat 540 (Cowell, 1907: 38-39).

sentient beings. Furthermore, because the line blurs between monks and laity, the responsibilities outlined in the Pāli Canon regarding rulers, monks, and laity blurs and becomes more homogenous in the Mahāyāna as well. Thus, directives such as ‘people should give half of their food away to beggars’ are not restricted to the laity, but are binding upon both lay and monastic *bodhisattvas*.<sup>511</sup>

Diverging from the Theravādin goal of *arahatship*, Mahāyāna Buddhism focuses on the *bodhisattva*, a being on the path to perfect Buddhahood. The *bodhisattva* path begins with developing the supreme altruistic motivation, *bodhicitta*, the Mind of Enlightenment or Awakening Mind, which arises from deep compassion for the suffering of others.<sup>512</sup> Śāntideva expresses this as:

This mind to benefit living beings,  
Which does not arise in others even for their own sakes,  
Is an extraordinary jewel of a mind,  
Whose birth is an unprecedented wonder.”<sup>513</sup>

*Bodhicitta* is expressed as a commitment to pursue enlightenment for the sake of all other beings. According to the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, being filled with great compassion for the

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<sup>511</sup> Uss Chapter XIX (Shih, 1994: 113).

<sup>512</sup> Williams, 1989: 198; Schmidt-Leukel 2006b: 97-98.

<sup>513</sup> BCA 1:25 (Elliot, 2002: 9).

countless other beings he sees, the *bodhisattva* swears. “I shall become a savior to all those beings, I shall release them from all their sufferings!”<sup>514</sup>

The path continues with the pursuit of six *pāramitās*, or perfections, which bear similarities to the Noble Eightfold Path: *dāna* (giving), *śīla* (morality/ethics), *vīrya* (energy), *kṣānti* (patience), *samādhi* (meditation), and *prajñā* (wisdom).<sup>515</sup> Because *dāna* is such a central virtue in the *bodhisattva* path, as well as in a discussion of poverty relief, it is discussed in greater detail below. The practice of the first five perfections culminates in the Perfection of Wisdom in which the *bodhisattva* realizes that every part of reality is empty of inherent existence; ultimately, there is no genuine difference between self and other, or between nirvana and *saṃsāra*. These teachings have direct implications on poverty relief.

### 5.2.1. The *Bodhisattva* Ideal

The line between laity and the *saṅgha* blurs in the Mahāyāna inasmuch as a lay follower may undertake the *bodhisattva* vows without entering the *saṅgha*. Thus, *bodhisattvas* are referred to as either home-dwelling (*grhastha*) or home-departed (*pravrajita*),<sup>516</sup> and may fill one of a wide range of social roles, be it monk, farmer, head of household, or ruler. Because of this development, the responsibility of the *bodhisattva* to relieve the suffering of the poor is equally binding upon all of these social groups—monks, lay followers, and rulers alike.

<sup>514</sup> AP (Conze, 1970: 238-9).

<sup>515</sup> Schmidt-Leukel, 2006b: 99-101; Skilton, 1997: 111. Later Mahāyāna traditions often include four additional perfections: *upāya* (skillful means), *prañidhāna* (the vow to achieve Buddhahood), *bala* (power), and *jñāna* (knowledge).

<sup>516</sup> Meadows, 1986: 66.

## 5.2.2. Generosity and Compassion

Two virtues closely associated with the Buddhist concept of poverty relief that receive a heightened emphasis in the Mahāyāna are *dāna*, which as we have seen means generosity or giving, and *karuṇā*, which means compassion. These virtues are particularly important because of their centrality in the Mahāyāna tradition, but they are also of special interest here because of their direct connection to the concepts of poverty relief or poverty alleviation.

### 5.2.2.1. Dāna

As I have demonstrated above, *Dāna* is the most basic and central virtue in both the Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions for effecting karmically fruitful actions. The Mahāyāna *Upāsakaśīla Sūtra* indicates that even the poor are to give whatever miniscule amount possible—even if it be retaining a generous spirit through giving small leftover morsels or crumbs of food to insects, the dirty water after washing dishes, or a piece of cloth small enough to make a candle wick.<sup>517</sup> The discourse goes on to say that if the poor have literally nothing to give, they are still to do what they can to help others give, or at the very least, they are to rejoice in the giving done by others. And, even if giving away the last handful of food would mean certain death, a wise person should still give it away.<sup>518</sup> The perfection of *dāna* is an essential step on the *bodhisattva* path and is directly related to the relief of the suffering of the poor through means of material offerings as well as through spiritual teachings and guidance.

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<sup>517</sup> Uss Chapter XIX (Shih, 1994: 112-113).

<sup>518</sup> Uss Chapter XIX (Shih, 1994: 114).

### 5.2.2.2. Karuṇā

Combined with wisdom, *karuṇā*, or compassion, is the essential virtue in the Mahāyāna tradition. As I have noted it is so central to the *bodhisattva* path, that the *bodhicaryāvatāra* indicates that “actions that are otherwise proscribed” are permitted if done in compassion for the benefit of another.<sup>519</sup> And, Śāntideva’s *Śikṣā-Samuccaya* and *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, both argue that *bodhisattvas* should constantly identify with other beings since there is no genuine difference between others and self, and one should act to prevent the suffering of any being because there is no genuine difference between one’s own suffering and that of another—there is only suffering.<sup>520</sup> This is significant to our discussion precisely because it includes the material suffering that causes the body pain, suffering which is a defining aspect of impoverishment. This dissolution of the distinction between one’s own suffering and the suffering of others is central to the conception of poverty and is also a key principle in a uniquely Buddhist approach to poverty relief.

### 5.2.3. Material Suffering in the Mahāyāna

In the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra*, the *bodhisattva* Avalokiteśvara asks the Buddha an important question concerning compassion and the existence of poverty and suffering in the world. “If the *bodhisattvas* are endowed with inexhaustible riches, and if they are most compassionate, then how can there be poor sentient beings in this world?”<sup>521</sup> This problem of evil or suffering

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<sup>519</sup> BCA 5:84 (Elliot, 2002: 58).

<sup>520</sup> SS XIX: 357-361(Bendall, 1922: 315-317).

<sup>521</sup> SNS Chapter VII (Keenan, 2000: 93).

elucidated in Mahāyāna texts speaks directly to the Mahāyāna preoccupation with material suffering, and the Mahāyāna perspective on poverty relief and the causes of poverty. Asaṅga raises the same question in the *Mahāyānasamgraha*:

If there really are such bodhisattvas who are encountered in the world, who, having accumulated merit through their trainings in discipline, concentration, and wisdom, have reached the ten masteries and attained unequalled and preeminent capabilities to benefit others, then why do we still see sentient beings encountering severe penury and suffering in the world?<sup>522</sup>

Again in *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, Śāntideva asks a similar question, but this time concerning the generosity of *bodhisattvas* in poverty relief:

If completing the perfection of giving  
Were eliminating the poverty of living beings,  
Since hungry beings still exist,  
How could the previous Buddhas have completed that perfection?<sup>523</sup>

The Mahāyāna concepts of cosmic or supramundane Buddhas and *bodhisattvas* raise the issue of the problem of evil or suffering. Why does impoverishment and suffering exist if these cosmic beings have the ability and the compassion to prevent it? In the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* the Buddha responds, “It is because the very actions of sentient beings are sinful... [There would be no poverty] if sentient beings did not set up obstacles by their own actions. The bodies of hungry

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<sup>522</sup> Ms 8:23 (Keenan, 1992: 99).

<sup>523</sup> BCA 5: 9 (Elliot, 2002: 48).

ghosts are oppressed by a great thirst, but even if they encounter the waters of the great sea, still they remain parched. This is not the fault of that great sea. It is the fault of the actions of those hungry ghosts themselves!”<sup>524</sup> Thus, poverty is said to exist in the world because sentient beings set up obstacles that cause suffering or prevent the relief of suffering. However, the text does not specify whose actions cause these obstacles—whether one causes his or her own suffering and prevents its relief, or whether some beings create obstacles that also cause others to suffer. It is certainly in line with Buddhist thought to acknowledge that one’s actions can cause or alleviate the suffering of oneself as well as others. The implication is that, despite the ability to give ‘inexhaustible treasures of the *bodhisattvas*’, those who are suffering are either unwilling or unable, due to the actions of others, to receive the relief that the *bodhisattvas* willingly give.

The *Mahāyānasamgraha* offers an alternative explanation for the existence of poverty and suffering in spite of the *bodhisattva*’s ability to prevent it:

This is because bodhisattvas see that, if they were to bestow riches, the actions of sentient beings in their consequent stage of wealth would constitute obstacles that would result in suffering and that this would hinder the good that they [otherwise] might engender. It is because bodhisattvas see that if they lack riches, they will be able to realize detestation of evil transmigration. It is because bodhisattvas see that if they were to bestow riches on them, then they would nurture the causes for all manner of evil states. It is because

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<sup>524</sup> SNS Chapter VII (Keenan, 2000: 93-94).

bodhisattvas see that if they were to bestow riches on them, this would be cause for them to oppress an untold number of other sentient beings.”<sup>525</sup>

Asaṅga explains that the *bodhisattvas* withhold the riches for the benefit of the poor. The *bodhisattvas* recognize that wealth can lead to greater suffering, can prevent one from non-attachment to the *samsāric* world, and causes all manner of evil states. It is noteworthy that wealth is spoken of in this passage as the cause of evil states, and it particularly mentions that wealth leads one to oppress others. It is out of compassion for the poor in fostering their spiritual development that *bodhisattvas* choose to allow poverty and suffering to exist in spite of their abilities to prevent them. This is easily understandable in light of the approach to voluntary poverty I have outlined above. Considering the role of voluntary poverty in the Buddhist path, it seems that some amount of material suffering might be a part of the ideal circumstances for enlightenment. But, the passage here only refers to riches or what we might call overabundance. What of providing the poor with the basic requirements of life, up to a point of simplicity but not overabundance? While riches may be corrupting, poverty also has a certain corrupting influence, leading to suffering and preventing the cultivation of virtues. In the end, poverty and wealth are neither necessarily good nor evil in themselves. Each carries the possibility of corruption as well as enlightenment.

Vimalakīrti also endorses the idea that the ideal place for spiritual development includes poverty and suffering because it allows one to practice the essential virtues in a rapid manner that would not be possible in what might otherwise be considered a more perfected or idyllic world, such as:

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<sup>525</sup> Ms 8:23 (Keenan, 1992: 99-100).

to win the poor by generosity; to win the immoral by morality; to win the hateful by means of tolerance; to win the lazy by means of effort; to win the mentally troubled by means of concentration; to win the falsely wise by means of true wisdom; to show those suffering from the eight adversities how to rise above them...<sup>526</sup>

Śāntideva, on the other hand, gives a different and in some ways more satisfying response to the question of the existence of poverty and suffering, explaining that it is not possible to actually relieve the summation of all suffering of innumerable sentient beings:

The completion of the perfection of giving is said to be  
The thought wishing to give everything to all living beings,  
Together with the merit that results from that giving;  
Therefore it depends only on mind.

(...)

It is not possible to subdue unruly beings  
Who are as extensive as space;  
But simply destroying the mind of anger  
Is the same as overcoming all these foes.  
Where is there enough leather  
To cover the surface of the earth?  
But just having leather on the soles of one's feet  
Is the same as covering the whole Earth.

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<sup>526</sup> Vn Chapter 10 (Thurman, 1976: 82-83).

In the same way, it is not possible  
 To control all external events;  
 But if I simply control my mind,  
 What need is there to control other things”<sup>527</sup>

Here, the phenomena of suffering cannot be restrained externally because there are unending numbers of suffering beings, and yet the intention of removing poverty is exalted nonetheless. Note, however, that this does not preclude action to remove the suffering of others; it merely provides a reason why it has not fully been completed yet.

Additionally, the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* offers a perspective that complements the *Mahāyānasamgraha sūtra*, asserting that it is inappropriate to only provide material goods, and that doing so can never ultimately release one from suffering:

Good son, if bodhisattvas, in benefiting sentient beings through their perfections, were to rely only upon material goods to bring [sentient beings] benefit and render them happy, and would not bother to lead them away from evil or establish them in good, that would be unskillful method. Why is that, good son? It is because it is not true that the one who does such things is really benefiting sentient beings.... Because sentient beings suffer because of their actions, and because their nature is suffering, it is impossible to lead them to happiness simply by the method of providing them with fleeting images of material things. The best benefit would be to establish them in good.”<sup>528</sup>

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<sup>527</sup> BCA 5:10-14 (Elliot, 2002: 48-49).

<sup>528</sup> SNS Chapter VII (Keenan, 2000: 88-89).

Again we see the notion that simply providing material goods to the needy might not ultimately lead them to do good. While providing material goods is a common behavior of *bodhisattvas*, this is only a part of the relief of suffering that they provide; mental and spiritual development are also part and parcel in the relief of suffering.

#### 5.2.4. Compassionate Intentions or Compassionate Acts?

An important question arises here concerning compassion and poverty relief in Buddhist thought: Is the compassion referred to in Buddhist texts merely intentional, aiming only at generating the desire to end the suffering of other beings, or does it in fact refer to concrete actions that are to be taken to actually alleviate suffering?

Stephen Jenkins has argued that Buddhist texts that describe *karuṇā*, tend to define it as an action or work.<sup>529</sup> Jenkins relies on Buddhaghosa's philological analysis of *karuṇā* found in *Visuddhimagga* to show that Buddhaghosa, a central authority in Theravāda Buddhism for interpretation of the Pāli Canon, understood the call for compassion as meaning aggressive action for the relief of the suffering of others.<sup>530</sup> Jenkins points out that this view is also supported in the philological analysis of *karuṇā* found in the influential early Mahāyāna *Akṣayamatirnirdeśa Sūtra*.<sup>531</sup>

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<sup>529</sup> Jenkins, 2003: 41-42.

<sup>530</sup> Vis IX: 92 (Ñāṇamoli, 1991: 310).

<sup>531</sup> See Braarvig, 1993: 354.

References to compassion then, simply by the term employed, imply a sort of concrete action rather than a mere feeling or emotion. The same is also clearly true of generosity. The *Upāsakaśīla sūtra* contends that the practice of giving is not merely intentional either:

Good son, it is said that the practice of giving is just thought because thought is the root of giving. This is not true. And why is it not true? The practice of giving involves the five aggregates, because it involves the actions of body speech, and mind. If giving is to benefit oneself and others, it should involve the five aggregates.”<sup>532</sup>

This is not to say, however, that Buddhist texts do not advocate compassion or generosity as an intention or a meditative goal. Indeed, Jenkins points out that the pre-Mahāyāna Sarvāstivāda School’s *Abhidarmakośa* maintains that the meditation on compassion generates merit, even if there is no actual beneficiary of compassionate action, but that “material offerings gain more merit than mere intentions, just as acting on a bad intention produces more demerit.”<sup>533</sup> Thus, although the intention of compassion or generosity does in itself generate merit, most references to compassion or generosity denote a concrete action, which will generate more merit and benefit for both parties involved than will mere intention.

### **5.3. The Duty to Relieve Poverty in the Mahāyāna**

The basic duty of rulers to provide material goods and property to the poor in their kingdom as outlined in the Pāli Canon also appears in Mahāyāna sources. In the widely cited early

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<sup>532</sup> USS Chapter XIX (Shih, 1994:105).

<sup>533</sup> Jenkins, 2003: 42.

Mahāyāna sūtra, *Ārya-satyaka-parivarta*, Satyavādin instructs rulers to protect the poor from harm caused by crop failure or famine, “robbers and thieves, armies from other states, and from each other.”<sup>534</sup> Here again we see that the rulers are indeed held responsible for the material well-being of their subjects.

However, rulers described in Mahāyāna texts often assume additional personal duties as a *bodhisattva* to provide for the poor, above and beyond those duties outlined in the Pāli Canon. One example of such a ruler committed to relieving poverty in their kingdom comes from the important Mahāyāna sūtra *The Sūtra of Queen Śrīmālā of the Lion’s Roar*. When undertaking the *bodhisattva* vows, the Indian Queen Śrīmālā vowed to use all the property she would receive as queen for the benefit of the poor in her kingdom:

I will not accumulate property for my own benefit. Whatever I receive will be used to assist living beings who are poor and suffering . . . When I see living beings who are lonely, imprisoned, ill, and afflicted by various misfortunes and hardships, I will never forsake them . . . Through my good deeds I will bring them benefits and liberate them from their pain.”<sup>535</sup>

*The Large Sūtra on Perfect Wisdom* also provides an example:

There are Bodhisattvas who, coursing in the six perfections, have become Universal Monarchs. Having taken the perfection of giving for their guide they will provide all beings with everything that brings ease—food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty. They

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<sup>534</sup> ASP Chapter 6 (Jamspal, 1991:188).

<sup>535</sup> Sds 2: 6-8 (Paul, 2004: 15).

will provide ... ointments, medicinal powders, incense, beds, seats, asylum, homes, money, grain, ... and the means of life—until, having established beings in the ten ways of wholesome action, they are reborn among the gods ... and know full enlightenment in the various Buddha-fields.<sup>536</sup>

Although we have seen that Pāli canonical texts also describe the material relief of poverty as an activity and duty of the laity and monks, it takes on a more central focus in the Mahāyāna sūtras. *The Flower Ornament Scripture*, for example, explains that *bodhisattvas* fulfill their duty to protect all sentient beings by “providing what they require.”<sup>537</sup> This may be clarified in *Entry Into the Realm of Reality*, which describes the duty of *bodhisattvas* to “put an end to poverty for all sentient beings, satisfy all sentient beings with gifts of food and drink, satisfy all beggars by giving away all goods.”<sup>538</sup> Śāntideva also includes reference to this in the *bodhisattva* vows:

May a rain of food and drink descend  
 To dispel the miseries of hunger and thirst;  
 And during the great aeon of famine,  
 May I become their food and drink  
 May I become an inexhaustible treasury  
 For the poor and destitute.  
 May I be everything they might need,  
 Placed freely at their disposal.

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<sup>536</sup> MP 66-67 (Conze, 1975: 71); see also MP 186-187, 263-264 (Conze, 1975: 138, 198).

<sup>537</sup> AS Book 26, Bequest (Cleary, 1993: 805).

<sup>538</sup> AS Book 39, *Gopa* (Cleary, 1993: 1414-1415).

From this moment on, without sense of loss,  
 I shall give away my body and likewise my wealth,  
 And my virtues amassed throughout the three times  
 To help all living beings, my mothers.”<sup>539</sup>

Similarly, in the *Śikṣā-Samuccaya*:

When any are hungry he gives them the best food. When any are frightened he gives them protection. When any are ill he exerts himself for their complete cure. The poor he rejoices with plenty . . . He goes share for share with those afflicted with poverty. He carries the burdens of the weary and exhausted.”<sup>540</sup>

The *Upāsakaśīla sūtra* identifies three general types of giving by *bodhisattvas*: the giving of the *Dhamma*; the giving of fearlessness, which specifically refers to the fear of rulers, wild animals, natural disasters, or robbers; and, the giving of wealth, which refers to all manner of material goods and possessions.<sup>541</sup> In all of these passages the giving that is instructed is giving of material goods to relieve the suffering of those in need.

#### 5.4. Material and Spiritual Needs

Perhaps, it might be argued, the references to providing aid or support to the poor merely concerns the giving of spiritual teachings and are not to be taken literally in the sense of giving

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<sup>539</sup> BCA 3:9-11 (Elliot, 2002: 28-29).

<sup>540</sup> SS XVI: 274 (Bendall, 1922: 251-252).

<sup>541</sup> USS Chapter XIX (Shih, 1994: 107).

material goods. While this is a clear possibility, it is not supported by the texts, which demonstrate a clear distinction between spiritual and material gifts and benefits. The distinction between giving material offerings and giving spiritual teachings noted in the Pāli Canon is also found in Mahāyāna sūtras. The Mahāyāna sources also indicate that the spiritual gifts or teachings are ultimately more valuable than material gifts. For example, *The Large sūtra on Perfect Wisdom* makes this distinction, asserting that spiritual teachings are a superior gift to material gifts.<sup>542</sup> The *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra*, quoted above, asserts that it is inappropriate to only provide material goods, and that doing so can never ultimately release one from suffering.<sup>543</sup> Nevertheless, as I have demonstrated, numerous Mahāyāna references affirm the importance of providing material goods in addition to the spiritual goods or teachings of the *Dhamma*.

This focus on the duty of *bodhisattvas* to provide both material and spiritual needs relates closely to the implication in the Pāli Canon that beings must have their basic material needs met before they are able to undertake spiritual development. The *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra* teaches of *bodhisattvas*:

During the short aeons of famine,  
 They become food and drink.  
 Having first alleviated thirst and hunger,  
 They teach the Dharma to living beings.  
 (...)

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<sup>542</sup> MP (Conze, 1975: 498).

<sup>543</sup> SNS Chapter VII (Keenan, 2000: 88-89).

For the sake of the poor,  
 They become inexhaustible treasures,  
 Causing those to whom they give their gifts  
 To conceive the spirit of enlightenment.”<sup>544</sup>

Here, then, the ideal *bodhisattva* is one who relieves the material suffering of the poor in order to prepare them for the ultimate end of suffering that the *bodhisattva* can then teach them in the *Dhamma*. In the *Dānapāramitāsamāsaḥ*, Ārya-Śūra also describes this spiritual benefit for the receiver of material goods:

The wise man offers the gift of food not in order to gain heaven or good fortune [but] with the thought, ‘By this means I will cause the ripening among mankind of long life, eloquence, power, and other attributes of a Buddha, and because of me sentient beings, attracted by material objects, will also become fit vessels of mine for the illustrious *dharma*.’ Acting for the benefit of the world, he also gives beverages to soothe the defiling thirst (*kleśatṛṣṇ*) of the world.”<sup>545</sup>

## 5.5. Giving and Merit

There is an important point of variance between the merit gained by giving to the poor and merit gained by giving to the *saṅgha* in the Mahāyāna sūtras and Pāli Canonical texts. The *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra* addresses the issue in the same way as we saw in the Pāli Canon. However, the conclusion it reaches concerning who is more worthy of offerings is exactly the

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<sup>544</sup> Vn Chapter 8 (Thurman, 1976: 70-71).

<sup>545</sup> PS 1:18-19 (Meadows, 1986: 161).

opposite of the Pāli Canonical or Theravādin view. The passages previously noted in the Pāli Canon assert that the *saṅgha* is more worthy of alms or offerings than the destitute are because the latter are more likely to be greedy in desiring and acquiring gifts. In the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra*, on the other hand, praise is bestowed upon the giver who gives “without any discrimination, impartially, with no expectation of reward, and with great love” to “the lowliest poor of the city, considering them as worthy of offering as the *Tathāgata* himself.”<sup>546</sup> The worthiness of the giver and receiver are customarily said to be factors that determine the amount of merit generated by an act. In this instance, the lowliest of the poor are placed on the same level of worthiness in receiving the gift as the monastic community, and even as the Buddha himself. Although the virtue of generosity or giving is still central, instead of the laity generating merit by giving to the *saṅgha* who are the most worthy of offerings, *bodhisattvas* are now said to make merit by giving to the lowliest poor, who are now seen as also worthy of offerings.

## 5.6. A Buddhist Approach to Poverty Relief

Given the Buddhist concept of the comprehensive nature of material poverty outlined in the previous chapter, and the duties to relieve poverty defined in Buddhist scriptures outlined here, how might genuinely Buddhist approaches to poverty relief appear? In the previous chapter I addressed the similarities between the capabilities approach to poverty and the Buddhist concepts of poverty. Similarly, a Buddhist approach to poverty relief will likely bear numerous similarities with such comprehensive approaches to poverty relief that include increasing income, basic health, education, and include generating social capital among the interdependent

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<sup>546</sup> Vn Chapter 4 (Thurman, 1976: 41).

relationships. A genuinely Buddhist approach to poverty relief should be as robust and nuanced as its concepts of poverty.

### 5.6.1. Skillful Means in Poverty Relief

One particularly striking example of poverty relief is taught in the *Lotus Sūtra*, one of the most popular of Mahāyāna texts.<sup>547</sup> It includes a prodigal son narrative in which the father becomes wealthy while the son is away, and when the son returns, he does not recognize his father and fears him. The son flees his true home in fear, believing that he will more easily sustain himself by living a simple life of poverty than by laboring with his father's workers. His father skillfully leads his son out of poverty by dressing in an impoverished manner so that he can approach and speak to his son, and by gradually showing him greater responsibility and possibilities leading to wealth. Eventually the son returns to his station of responsibility over numerous other workers and inherits his father's wealth. This well-known narrative is often used to illustrate the Buddha's skill in presenting the *Dhamma* to each individual in the best way possible for each particular individual. Peter Herschok reads this parable as a metaphor for poverty relief efforts correctly conceived:

The solution to poverty given metaphorically in the *Lotus Sutra* has two major dimensions: first, discontinuing ignorance of the poor and making a place for them within the overlapping and integrated contributory networks of the local socio-economic and natural ecosystems; and secondly, providing the poor with clear venues for mounting contributions to those ecosystems. An important element in the Lotus Sutra narrative is

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<sup>547</sup> LS CH. IV (Reeves, 2008: 141-158).

that alleviating and eventually eliminating poverty involves drawing the poor into increasingly responsible positions that allow them to make an ever more significant difference for others, but also for themselves.<sup>548</sup>

Hershock relies on this highly influential sūtra to demonstrate that in Buddhist thought poverty relief is not conceived of as simply a matter of ‘throwing money at the problem’, but rather of skillfully leading the poor out of their impoverished circumstances through engaging with them on an equal level, through instruction or education, and ultimately through establishing the confidence and social relationships necessary to provide for oneself and for others and transform the processes resulting in poverty. We see here clear similarities with the notions of poverty as social exclusion and the solution as requiring a building up of social capital through relationships. While providing material goods for the needy is important, as we have seen, it is not the sole or ultimate goal.

### **5.6.2. A Comprehensive Approach**

We have seen examples of teachings advocating a focus on poverty relief from all sectors, including targeted and direct government programs, private and charitable programs, and even small-scale entrepreneurial microenterprises—a broad comprehensive approach that addresses poverty on the systemic as well as individual levels. The understanding of the goal of poverty relief is equally broad. Because the comprehensive understanding of poverty in the Buddhist conception includes far more than mere material lack, the objective of poverty relief, from a Buddhist perspective, cannot be simply to increase income. Providing basic needs such as by

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<sup>548</sup> Hershock, 2004: 59-63.

increasing one's income and ensuring essential health care can only be part of this process, which must also include factors related to the development of the whole individual and his or her relationships, such as education, strengthened social relationships, security, and empowerment to address additional new problems and conflicts as they arise. In the previous chapter, I referred to David Loy's notion that true poverty relief, or true development, can only occur through transforming greed into generosity; ill-will or hatred into compassion; and, delusion or ignorance into wisdom.<sup>549</sup> Poverty relief, when correctly conceived, provides the basic material needs for sustenance—as this is essential to prepare one for enlightenment—but, beyond this, it also strengthens the social relationships that support the poor, as well as cultivates the virtues that lead to enlightenment, and ultimately dissolves the social distinctions that create the discrete categories of the wealthy and the poor. The goal of true development then is not merely to increase the income of the poor until it rises above an established poverty marker, and not even to move beyond this by helping to transport those suffering from poverty to a state in which they become the givers of their own overabundance, but rather to transform the entire process that gives rise to the phenomena of impoverishment into one which removes all forms of suffering, ultimately ending with individual and collective enlightenment.

### **5.6.3. The Non-Self Teaching**

Another distinctive teaching at the core of Buddhism which could form the foundation of a uniquely Buddhist approach to poverty relief is the non-self teaching. While this teaching reaches its height of development in Mahāyāna teachings on emptiness, it is central to

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<sup>549</sup> Loy, 2003b:10.

Theravādin thought as well. As I have noted, in Buddhist thought, one of the major sources of suffering is the mistaken belief in a self as an independent and permanent entity or phenomenon. Buddhist teachings hold that what we think of as a permanent self is really a constantly changing flow of thoughts, feelings, intentions, physical particles, and so forth, all of which are interdependent and inter-related. When we take any of these to be a permanent self, we suffer. Applying this to the realm of poverty— just as there is no independent or permanent 'I' that is an angry person, there is not one that is either wealthy or poor, nor 'developed' or 'underdeveloped'. While poverty and wealth have a generational dimension that is often tied to individual and familial identity, they are merely some of the many conditions that can be changed and should not be seen as significant or fundamental distinctions between individuals, but rather as the result of processes and relations making up a given system that creates and upholds the wealth/poverty distinctions. The application of this non-self teaching to poverty relief is exemplified by Socially Engaged Buddhist Roshi Glassman in New York City, whose organization aims to dissolve the conceptual framework that differentiates oneself from any other who is suffering, as well as the dissolution of the concepts of giver, receiver and gift. The giver, the receiver, and the gift are not to be seen as independent, separated phenomena. This is a direct application of the teaching found in the *Perfection of Giving* section of *The Six Perfections* in a Mahāyāna *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra* known as the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Sūtra*.<sup>550</sup> Here *bodhisattvas* are said to think the following when pondering the virtue of giving:

“I practise the perfection of giving. I, having made this gift into the common property of all beings, dedicate it to supreme enlightenment, and that without apprehending

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<sup>550</sup> PSS 263-264 (Conze, 2006:136-137).

anything. By means of this gift, and its fruit may all beings in this very life be at their ease, and may they one day enter Nirvana!” Tied by three ties he gives a gift. Which three? A perception of self, a perception of others, a perception of the gift. The supramundane perfection of giving, on the other hand, consists in the threefold purity. What is the threefold purity? Here a Bodhisattva gives a gift, and he does not apprehend a self, nor a recipient, nor a gift; also no reward of his giving. He surrenders that gift to all beings, but he apprehends neither beings nor self. He dedicates that gift to supreme enlightenment, but he does not apprehend any enlightenment. This is called the supramundane perfection of giving.

This *sūtra* defines the ‘supramundane perfection of giving’ as the nondualistic conception, or the dissolution of the concepts of giver, gift, and receiver. I will return to Glassman’s practical efforts to realize this conception of others and the suffering of others as one’s own among the participants in his project.

### **5.7. Buddhist Poverty Relief Efforts**

I have noted above that Buddhist texts supply examples of the various social groups providing for the poor, and undertaking social improvement projects. In addition to these noted examples of poverty relief, there are also historical examples, and contemporary Buddhists engaged in poverty relief efforts also exemplify poverty relief projects based on Buddhist principles as well. I will briefly outline some of these examples of how the above principles can be, and have been, applied in actual poverty relief efforts.

### 5.7.1. Historical Examples

In addition to the above examples of poverty relief taken from Buddhist scriptures, there are other well-known historical examples. King Asoka is perhaps the best-known king in the Buddhist tradition and is widely considered the supreme example of the ideal ruler.<sup>551</sup> King Asoka was a great emperor, ruling much of the Indian subcontinent from 269 BCE to 232 BCE, but he is often revered in the Buddhist tradition for his compassionate works. Asoka is said to have undertaken public works projects to provide for those in need in his own kingdom in India as well as to aid those in other neighboring kingdoms as well.<sup>552</sup> Many other rulers who similarly strived to provide for the needy and poor, such as by building alms houses and hospitals followed his example in doing so.<sup>553</sup> This has remained an ideal for Buddhist rulers throughout the long history of the tradition.

There are also historical examples of the monastic *sangha* taking part in poverty relief efforts that stand as exemplary models. In the previous chapter on Buddhist economics, I pointed out that early records of Buddhism in China indicate that monasteries expanded their role to include lending money and other goods. This transformation may have taken place as a result of adaptation to Chinese culture, or it may have originated in India and carried over into China; a dearth of records of Indian monasteries leaves the question unanswered. Nevertheless, at some point early in the historical records, the Buddhist monasteries began to function in part as a center for economic activities, providing among other things services and material goods to the

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<sup>551</sup> Nikam, 1978.

<sup>552</sup> Harvey, 2000: 115-117.

<sup>553</sup> Harvey, 2000: 200-201.

needy. Monasteries today will also often provide food, clothing, and education to the needy in their communities; the provision of such goods and services to the needy has long been a function of monasteries in the Buddhist tradition.<sup>554</sup>

A prime example of both the ways which the monastic *saṅgha* can engage directly in poverty relief efforts as well as the ways that rulers or the state can cooperate with the monastic *saṅgha* in such efforts is the monk-led development program in modern Thailand. As Thailand passed through a period of modernization in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the government undertook partnerships with the monastic *saṅgha* in community development projects in poor areas of Thailand, such as building roads, bridges, medical clinics and wells, as well as teaching health and nutrition, first aid, sanitation, environmental conservation, and organizing types of credit unions.<sup>555</sup> During this period, the role of the local monks in development projects expanded from simply providing information about the community and informal support to development workers and their projects to formally training monks to take part in or even lead projects and to encourage community members in their sermons to take part in the projects as a productive social activity that generates karmic merit. The support of the *saṅgha* was intended to motivate greater support among local communities as well as to ensure that the material progress promoted in the communities did not also lead to moral and religious decline; it was feared that such decline would lead to public disorder and an increase in support for Communism.<sup>556</sup> While many of these community development projects were initiated and led by local monks, many

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<sup>554</sup> Rājavaramuni, 1990: 38; Ornatowski, 1996: 212-217; Homer, 2005: 614.

<sup>555</sup> Suksamran, 1976: 65-108; Harvey, 2012: 386-387; Swearer, 2010: 147-153.

<sup>556</sup> Harvey, 2012: 386; Suksamran, 1976: 51-61.

others were more formally undertaken as government projects initiated by government officials.<sup>557</sup> Harvey notes that these programs have been criticized by some because they compromise the role of the *saṅgha* as examples to the community as spiritual elites when they undertake such secular affairs and open themselves to exploitation for political purposes.<sup>558</sup> Supporters of social activism among the *saṅgha*, on the other hand, argue that the development projects have often been very successful at improving communities materially while also reasserting the traditional roles of the monks as community leaders.<sup>559</sup> Due to its role in the community, the *saṅgha* must necessarily respond to political, social, and economic changes in the world around them, many of which can happen rapidly; I have indicated that such activities can be traced back to early Buddhism in India, and examples like the monk-led development programs in Thailand indicate that the *saṅgha* must seek some balance between spiritual and social pursuits in the modern world as well.

### **5.7.2. Socially Engaged Buddhism**

Since it began at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, no discussion of Buddhist social ethics would be complete without discussing the contemporary movement within the Buddhist tradition known as Socially Engaged Buddhism. Because of its clear focus on social and political activism, Socially Engaged Buddhism is the most fertile area within the entire history of the Buddhist tradition for examples of Buddhist approaches to poverty alleviation. I will here briefly introduce the Socially

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<sup>557</sup> Swearer, 2010: 147.

<sup>558</sup> Harvey, 2012: 386-387.

<sup>559</sup> Harvey, 2012: 386.

Engaged Buddhist movement and some of its major figures, before describing key examples of such poverty alleviation efforts.

Socially Engaged Buddhism is best understood as a reaction among various Buddhist groups or practitioners to particular situations confronting the modern world, such as war, poverty, and modernization.<sup>560</sup> As such, it largely developed as a response to contemporary ethical issues, such as economic injustice, environmental destruction, and human rights. Perhaps because it is a response to these modern issues that often require innovative solutions, the continuity of Socially Engaged Buddhist teachings and ethics with the long history of the Buddhist tradition has been debated. Some scholars have described Engaged Buddhism as differing qualitatively from Buddhist ethics in their approaches, even so much so as to constitute a new school of Buddhism, or a fourth *yāna*.<sup>561</sup> Yet, other scholars and virtually all Socially Engaged Buddhists claim that their teachings on social and political activism are consistent with those that have always existed in the Buddhist tradition.<sup>562</sup>

#### 5.7.2.1. Background

In 2000, scholars at a conference on Socially Engaged Buddhism proposed a definition stating that it is characterized by:

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<sup>560</sup> King, 2009.

<sup>561</sup> Queen, 2001a. This refers to the typical classification of the three main schools of Buddhism, Theravādin (sometimes improperly called Hīnayāna), Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna.

<sup>562</sup> Yarnall, 2001; See also Queen, 2004.

a reorientation of Buddhist soteriology and ethics to identify and address sources of human suffering outside of the cravings and ignorance of the sufferer – such as social, political, and economic injustice, warfare, violence, and environmental degradation.<sup>563</sup>

Christopher Queen suggested an alternate definition, defining it as “the dharma of social service and activism, premised on the belief that suffering is not only the result of individual karma, and that its remediation requires collective effort.”<sup>564</sup> Dr. A.T. Ariyaratne, the founder of the Sri Lankan *Sarvodaya Śramadāna* movement, exemplifies still another perspective, holding that the Buddhist teachings of selflessness and interconnection mean that individual liberation cannot be separated from the liberation of society.<sup>565</sup> These definitions point to the focus on social or political action as somehow central to the path to an entwined collective and individual liberation characterized by Socially Engaged Buddhism.

The birth of the movement is often attributed to the Zen monk and activist, Thich Nhat Hanh, in war-torn Vietnam in the 1960s who coined the phrase Socially Engaged Buddhism when referring to Buddhists engaged in social action.<sup>566</sup> Nhat Hanh has since declared the term a

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<sup>563</sup> As quoted in Queen, 2001a: 26-27.

<sup>564</sup> Queen, 2001a: 27.

<sup>565</sup> Ibid.

<sup>566</sup> Queen, 2001b: 25. Christopher Queen, however, traces the genealogy of the movement to an early confrontation between Buddhists and Westerners which occurred in a religious debate between Ven. Mohottivatte Gunananda and evangelist Christian missionaries before an audience of approximately ten thousand Sinhalese Buddhists in 1873.

misnomer because, as he says, all Buddhists necessarily engage with their societies.<sup>567</sup> Many Socially Engaged Buddhist leaders in various countries and from varying schools of Buddhism have looked to Nhat Hanh as an inspiration in their own formulations of social and political activism in their Buddhist practice.

As a clear explication of what have become foundational principles of Socially Engaged Buddhism, Nhat Hanh's Tiep Hien Order holds a commitment to engaging with suffering in society as a basic precept. For example, the order's fourth precept states:

Do not avoid contact with suffering or close your eyes before suffering. Do not lose awareness of the existence of suffering in the life of the world. Find ways to be with those who are suffering by all means, including personal contact and visits, images, and sound. By such means awaken yourself and others to the reality of suffering in the world.”<sup>568</sup>

And, the fifth precept:

Do not accumulate wealth while millions are hungry. Do not take as the aim of your life fame, profit, wealth, or sensual pleasure. Live simply and share time, energy, and material resources with those who are in need.”<sup>569</sup>

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<sup>567</sup> Kraft, 1992: 18.

<sup>568</sup> Nhat Hanh, 1987: 91.

<sup>569</sup> Ibid.

Although Socially Engaged Buddhist leaders are found addressing a range of political and socio-economic conditions in different communities, they generally share a common focus on nonviolent social and political activism as a means to reducing or eliminating material suffering similar to the framework espoused by Nhat Hanh.

One cannot clearly address the historical background of Engaged Buddhism without addressing the scholarly debate surrounding it. Is Engaged Buddhism simply the result of a syncretism of classical Buddhism and modern Western teachings on social justice such as is found in the Abrahamic faiths?<sup>570</sup> Or, have Buddhists in fact always been ‘engaged’ with society throughout their history? The key question that this debate seems to hinge on is this: Do the Engaged Buddhists teachings on social or political action arise from within their tradition, or have they been imported into it from some other source? And, if they arise through the influence from another source, does it then mean the movement is no longer authentically Buddhist?

There is some merit to the claim that traditionally Buddhists have not sought to change society, but rather to escape from it, as is evident in the example set by the *saṅgha*; some Buddhists do indeed retreat from society to engage in meditative practices. These ‘forest-dwelling monks’ may do so in the belief that the suffering of *saṃsāra* is an inherent part of society and social relationships, and therefore they seek to escape from it by removing themselves from it. There is, however, another trend in the ‘village-dwelling monks’ and virtually all of the lay followers which emphasizes that the suffering inherent in *saṃsāra* is conditioned by mental states, which are overcome by following the teachings of the Buddha concerning ethical or moral behavior in

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<sup>570</sup> As suggested in Loy, 2003a: 16.

relation to other beings in society as well as mental training. Considering that the greatest number of Buddhists, both monks and lay followers, have followed the ‘village-dwelling’ approach historically, it is both odd and inaccurate to suppose that the necessary ideal among all Buddhists is to withdraw from society.

But, at the heart of this criticism is a deeper issue that also merits some attention. James Dietrick has argued that Engaged Buddhist ethics are not consistent with the most basic Buddhist teachings on *dukkha*, or suffering, found in the Four Noble Truths. According to Dietrick, in Buddhist thought

suffering is a psychological state brought on by individual’s attachments. It is not the direct and necessary result of external conditions, but rather the result of the manner in which those conditions are responded to.<sup>571</sup>

Furthermore,

suffering for Buddhism is not typically equated with physical pain or societal oppression, at least not in the deepest sense of *dukkha*. Rather, it is the sense of unsatisfactoriness that comes with the perverse tendency to cling to the self and other ostensibly illusory objects in an ever-changing world.”<sup>572</sup>

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<sup>571</sup> Dietrick, 2001: 263.

<sup>572</sup> Dietrick, 2001: 263-265.

This dissatisfaction “cannot be eradicated by eliminating the causes of oppression,” and therefore, “work toward creation of a good society ... holds no intrinsic value in Buddhism.”<sup>573</sup>

To Dietrick, then, Engaged Buddhism is inconsistent with the most basic doctrine of the Buddhist tradition insofar as it teaches that suffering is overcome through changes to external conditions rather than internal states.

However, this myopic view of suffering ignores the full sense of the term *dukkha* that I have outlined above. Although some of the most common forms of suffering may indeed be called psychological states, it would be incorrect to assert that *dukkha* does not also refer to the forms of suffering that may result from external conditions. Dietrick is correct, in one sense, that the Buddhist term *dukkha* may refer to psychological suffering and that it is transcended by removing attachments. However, this is only one form of *dukkha* described in Buddhist texts, and one must not ignore the other forms, even if they are not considered the deepest sense of *dukkha*. As noted earlier, the various notions of *dukkha* can be divided into three different types: *dukkha-dukkhatā*, *vipariṇāma-dukkhatā*, and *saṅkhāra-dukkhatā*.<sup>574</sup> *Dukkha-dukkhatā* includes the physical and mental pain or discomfort that is generally associated with the term suffering. *Vipariṇāma-dukkhatā* is suffering that arises from impermanence, and includes the fear of death and other fears and dissatisfactions that are associated with the fleeting or impermanent nature of things. *Saṅkhāra-dukkhatā* refers to suffering caused by conditioned states. Particularly important to Buddhist thought is this type of *dukkha*, resulting from grasping at the *kandhas* and taking them as a permanent self. Although this last form of *dukkha* is said to be optional, the first

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<sup>573</sup> Ibid.

<sup>574</sup> SN IV.38 (Bodhi, 2000: 259); See also Loy, 2001a: 19-22.

two forms are inevitable. In fact, elsewhere the Buddha described *dukkha* as one of the fundamental characteristics of this *samsāric* world that one is only ultimately liberated from once it is left behind when one enters nirvana.<sup>575</sup> This would imply that some forms of *dukkha* are only finally transcended when one leaves this world of *samsāra*. If this is the case, then there are types of suffering, such as physical pain or illness, which are indeed the direct result of external conditions. There appears, therefore, to be nothing inconsistent with the Buddhist tradition in the Engaged Buddhist's goal of reducing or eliminating any physical or emotional forms of suffering of other beings whenever possible—indeed have presented here already ample passages in Buddhist scriptural texts that promote such objectives. The problem would arise if Engaged Buddhists were to make the further claim that *all* forms of suffering may be overcome by properly altering social or political systems. It is likely closer to the truth to say that a Socially Engaged Buddhist view on these material and physical forms of suffering is that the other forms are conditioned by them; that is to say that the more psychological forms of suffering and attachment are brought about by the inequalities and human rights violations. Reducing or removing the causes of these material forms of suffering will likely also reduce the other forms of suffering present in our globalized world.

Another common criticism of Engaged Buddhism is that the shift of focus onto establishing just social or political structures is inconsistent with the characteristic Buddhist focus on enlightenment. Bardwell Smith, rightly points out that:

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<sup>575</sup> Skilton, 1997: 27-31.

The primary goal of Buddhism is not a stable order or just society but the discovery of genuine freedom (or awakening) by each person. It has never been asserted that the conditions of society are unimportant or unrelated to this more important goal, but it is critical to stress the distinction between what is primary and what is not. For Buddhists to lose this distinction is to transform their tradition into something discontinuous with its original and historic essence.<sup>576</sup>

Some critics claim that Engaged Buddhists have taken that step of losing the distinction between what is primary and what is not, and have become discontinuous with the original and historic essence of Buddhism.

However, the relieving of material sufferings of the poor does not necessarily entail a change of final goals or primary objectives. As indicated in the narrative found in the *Dhammapada* commentary of the poor traveller who had to be fed before receiving the *Dhamma*, the relief of material suffering may be done precisely so that the sufferer will then be in a position to accept the *Dhamma* and ultimately reach an end of all suffering; this is entirely consistent with both Theravādin and Mahāyāna teachings.<sup>577</sup> In such instances, relief of suffering is then merely a means to that ultimate goal of enlightenment or liberation. The distinction here, if there is a substantial one, is merely between immediate and long-term objectives. One might ask then, what exactly is the substantial difference between the two, if awakening or ultimate liberation is the long-term or final goal in both Engaged Buddhism and the broader Buddhist tradition? Again, an immediate goal of removing the conditions resulting in material human suffering

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<sup>576</sup> Quoted in Dietrick, 2001: 261.

<sup>577</sup> DTK 15: 5 (Buddhaghosa, 1921: 74-76).

through establishing a just society is not in itself inconsistent with the characteristic Buddhist goal of relieving suffering, and is particularly in line with *bodhisattva* goals to relieve all forms of suffering of all beings.

An important criticism of the view that Engaged Buddhism is discontinuous with the tradition is that it falls prey to charges of orientalism. As I noted at the beginning of this dissertation, it is not entirely clear exactly what the original and historic essence of Buddhism would be, and many scholars now take the position that Buddhism has never been one clear homogenous body of doctrines or views.<sup>578</sup> Accepting this historical actuality, in the end the fact that Engaged Buddhists have interpreted the *Dhamma*, and applied it to the modern world, places them firmly within the tradition of other Buddhists before them who have gone through the same process in their own times and places. Susan Darlington notes that since the earliest time of the Buddha, Buddhists “have always adapted their interpretations and practices of the religion to fit a changing socio-political and natural environment.”<sup>579</sup> Loy argues that this ability to blend with other cultures and beliefs is precisely one of the great strengths of Buddhism evident throughout its history.<sup>580</sup> The ability to both influence and be influenced by other beliefs and practices has helped to make it a major world religion, and this evolution or hybridization is found throughout the entire history of Buddhism. Similarly, Loy argues, Engaged Buddhism is a fruit of the mixture of Buddhism with the Abrahamic religion’s prophetic dimension concerned with social

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<sup>578</sup> For example, Faure, 2009; Schmidt-Leukel, 2006b.

<sup>579</sup> Darlington, 2001: 106.

<sup>580</sup> Loy, 2003a: 16.

justice.<sup>581</sup> If the history of the Buddhist tradition has been one of constant mixing and evolution, it seems inconsistent to criticize that process as it happens today. As King points out, if leaders had not emerged to directly confront the ethical dilemmas imposed by the conditions afflicting Buddhists of the day, Buddhism would have become irrelevant to entire nations and generations.<sup>582</sup> The Buddha is said to have used ‘skillful means’ in his teaching, by tailoring the content of his message to his audience, making it ultimately applicable to all of his listeners regardless of their particular stage of moral or spiritual development. The Socially Engaged Buddhist movement can be seen as another transformation, or another application of the Buddhist message to the modern world.

What, then, of the claim that a focus on social and political activism has always been a part of the history of the Buddhist tradition? Although compassion and altruism in the relief of material sufferings is evident since the beginnings of the Buddhist tradition, particularly so in the *bodhisattva* ideal, Engaged Buddhists may indeed have developed those ideas into a new understanding of the role of these teachings in spiritual practice.<sup>583</sup> As I have noted previously, there is some evidence that Buddhist monasteries in China and Japan often served as centers for road and bridge building, public works projects, social revolution, military defense, orphanages, travel hostels, medical education, hospital building, free medical care, the stockpiling of medicines, conflict intervention, moderation of penal codes, programs to assist the elderly and poor including stockpiles of resources for hunger and hardship, famine and epidemic relief, and

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<sup>581</sup> Ibid.

<sup>582</sup> King, 2009:

<sup>583</sup> Jenkins, 2001; Zelinski, 2001; Queen, 2001b: 6, 8.

bathing houses.<sup>584</sup> Scarcity of records from India makes it uncertain as to whether or not such activities took place there as well. However, until the development of Engaged Buddhism, social or political activism does not seem to have taken on the role of a central activity or step in the path to liberation.<sup>585</sup>

Sallie King presents what seems to be the most balanced perspective on Engaged Buddhism, arguing that, although they also show some influence of Western analysis, Engaged Buddhists base their approaches on the central Buddhist teachings of karma, *dukkha* and the Four Noble Truths, causality and dependent origination, non-self, and interdependence, in addition to the characteristic Buddhist ethics and virtues concerning non-violence, *dāna*, compassion and loving-kindness.<sup>586</sup> Engaged Buddhists simply apply these key principles to what may be new situations and ethical dilemmas, resulting in what appears to some to be new principles or at least new interpretations of them.

Queen notes that to some Engaged Buddhist leaders, such as the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Maha Ghosananada, personal spirituality is the drive for, and the shaping force of, their activism.<sup>587</sup> It is because of the level of spirituality that they have developed that they see a need for social action, and it is then complimentary to their spirituality. Others, such as Dalit or Ambedkarite Buddhists, make activism more foundational to their practice, shifting the focus almost entirely onto activism, believing that activism in struggling against class oppression is

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<sup>584</sup> Queen, 2001b: 32-33; See also Gomez, 1987; Wright, 1970: 58, 75, and 93-94.

<sup>585</sup> Queen, 2001a.

<sup>586</sup> King 2009: 13-39; King 2005:12-41.

<sup>587</sup> Queen, 2001b: 2-3.

itself the spirituality that must be practiced. These Buddhist converts from the Untouchable caste in India often choose to forego the more familiar and typical Buddhist meditative practices making up the *Samādhi* grouping of the eightfold path precisely because they instill feelings of equanimity, tolerance, and peace which may conflict with a necessary resolve in their struggle.

Socially Engaged Buddhism did not originate in one particular location or with one leader or personality, but rather it began as various Buddhist leaders emerged throughout Asia in response to the conditions confronting their particular communities. Sallie King attributes this phenomenon to the numerous radical changes and events occurring in Asia in modern history:

The multiple crises that hit Asia in the twentieth century were devastating to much of Buddhist Asia. Large parts of World War II, the Cold War, and the Vietnam War/war in Southeast Asia were fought there, directly affecting Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and much of the rest of Southeast Asia and resulting in millions of deaths. There has been genocide in Cambodia and foreign invasion and cultural genocide in Tibet, again resulting in millions of deaths in both countries. Countries such as Sri Lanka have been impoverished and politically uprooted by colonial occupiers. Buddhist Asia has generated some extremely repressive governments—for example, Burma/Myanmar. Ecological crisis has become quite acute in some areas, such as Thailand, where deforestation has devastated some of the fishing and agricultural foundations of the economy.<sup>588</sup>

Additionally, King continues:

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<sup>588</sup> King, 2009: 2-3.

Buddhist Asia has also seen some long-term social ills come to a head in the twentieth century, owing in part to the encounter with Western cultures—notably the extreme social inequality, bigotry, and poverty suffered by the ex-untouchables in India and the repressed and inferior status of women in much of Buddhist Asia. Finally, in the latter half of the twentieth century, Buddhist Asia was subjected to the powerful and related forces of rapid modernization, Westernization, and globalization, transforming foundational cultural patterns that have existed for centuries and even millennia.<sup>589</sup>

King points out that many prominent Engaged Buddhist leaders have been significantly influenced by the West.<sup>590</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, for example, was educated in the West. Nevertheless, she argues that Engaged Buddhists base their approaches on genuinely Buddhist teachings.

#### 5.7.2.2. *Sarvodaya Śramadāna*

Socially Engaged Buddhist poverty relief projects provide contemporary examples of comprehensive social improvement programs based on Buddhist principles. Rather than searching the texts for examples, as we have done so far, we can instead take a closer look at how such programs work on the ground in our own time. *Sarvodaya Śramadāna* is an excellent example of a Buddhist community development organization. *Sarvodaya Śramadāna* movement means the 'sharing effort for the enlightenment of all' movement. It has been described by Ken Jones as “arguably the largest and most comprehensive example of socially Engaged Buddhism

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<sup>589</sup> King, 2009: 3.

<sup>590</sup> King, 2009: 11-12.

in the world today.”<sup>591</sup> *Sarvodaya* relies on some of the key early Buddhist texts I have outlined above and sees itself as recovering the social ethic of early Buddhism.<sup>592</sup> Those key texts include the *Kūṭadanta Sutta*, which points to poverty as a cause of moral degeneration and social decay; the *Sigālovāda Sutta*, which deals with duties to others in society; and the narrative in the *Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā* of the lay-follower Magha and the social improvement programs he voluntarily started, which essentially resulted in the transformation of society and his miraculous protection.<sup>593</sup>

King describes the *Sarvodaya Śramadāna* method as community-based and community-led. A village invites a *Sarvodaya Śramadāna* worker to visit it, where he or she consults with the local leaders and introduces the idea of ‘village awakening’, and suggests that the villagers organize a local village *Śramadāna*, which can gradually grow to collectively tackle any problems the community might be facing, from clean water and basic healthcare to education to microcredit and village-banking projects, and from there they then help it spread to other villages.<sup>594</sup> The village *Śramadāna* becomes a center for community members to interact regularly and positively as they discuss needs within their community. Ariyaratne exemplifies a comprehensive approach to relieving a comprehensive notion of poverty, by aiming to build a society in which all needs are met—not only the economic, but social, cultural, psychological, political, and spiritual needs as well. *Sarvodaya Śramadāna*’s idea of poverty and development are much broader than most

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<sup>591</sup> Jones, 1989: 25.

<sup>592</sup> Bond, 1988: 249, 252- 253; Harvey, 2000: 231-232.

<sup>593</sup> DN 5: 127-149 (Walshe, 1995: 133-141); DN 31 (Walshe, 1995: 461-469); Jat 31 (Cowell, 1895a: 76-82) and, DTK 2.7b (Burlingame, 1921a: 315-324).

<sup>594</sup> King, 2009: 105-113.

development organizations because it is trying to achieve development, not only in the economic sense of increasing income, producing goods, and lowering unemployment, but in the sense of total human development or what it calls awakening.

*Sarvodaya* employs a model that considers the process of poverty alleviation incomplete until the poor are transformed to not only value generosity toward others, but to have the capability or substantial freedom to also be able to give of their abundance to others, to spread their realm of capabilities and responsibilities into neighboring villages; the poor in effect are thereby transformed from the receivers of aid to givers. *Sarvodaya's* goal is to help impoverished or otherwise underprivileged people assert their value as humans and share the material and non-material resources in society on an equal basis with others.<sup>595</sup> Here we can see a focus on social inclusion or full participation in society; part of poverty relief becomes the reintegration of the impoverished into the community. Harvey describes this broader goal of development as “arousing villagers from their passivity and getting them involved in choosing and working on projects, such as building a road to their village or organizing a marketing co-operative. It draws on Buddhist ideals such as generosity and loving kindness, and seeks to get all sections of the community to participate and work together so as to experience their individual and communal potential for changing their economic, social, natural and spiritual environments.”<sup>596</sup> The inter-relatedness and interdependence in society is recognized here as monks also take part in this layered program, demonstrating a society-wide movement endeavoring to include all sectors of society.

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<sup>595</sup> Harvey 2000: 227; Ariyaratne, 1995: 11.

<sup>596</sup> Harvey 2012: 381.

### 5.7.2.3. Roshi Bernie Glassman

Another fitting example of an Engaged Buddhist poverty alleviation project is led by the American Zen Roshi Bernie Glassman, founder of the Zen Peacemaker Order.<sup>597</sup> Glassman started a number of poverty-related programs, including ‘street retreats’ in which the affluent spend time living on the streets like the homeless populations; pilgrimages to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where participants bear witness to the atrocities of Holocaust and sit with open minds and hearts seeking insight and transformation; The Greyston Mandala, a network of nonprofit economic development organizations that provide housing, employment, and other services to homeless and impoverished individuals; and, an HIV/AIDS program that provides housing and health services.<sup>598</sup>

Echoing Ariyaratne’s participatory approach to an extent, Glassman began by asking the poor in New York directly what they needed. Recognizing much broader needs among the poor than simply a job, Glassman organized the Greyston Mandala, a network of for-profit businesses and not-for-profit agencies focused on serving the poor. The Mandala is made up of a bakery, affordable housing, including housing and health services for those with HIV/AIDS, and programs to provide training, counseling, child care, after-school programs, and community gardens.

In Glassman’s ‘street retreats’ in New York City, his students undertake a period of homelessness, living on the streets with the homeless of New York in order to break down the

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<sup>597</sup> King, 2009: 113-117.

<sup>598</sup> King, 2009: 7.

conceptual distinctions between themselves and others. Glassman sees this as a step toward helping those in need, exemplifying the Mahāyāna Buddhist understanding of the non-self teaching—as seen in the *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra* discussed above which describes complete generosity in which the concepts of giver, receiver, and gift are dissolved or transcended.<sup>599</sup>

Sallie King explains,

these scriptures build on the earlier teachings of interdependence and no-self to teach *śūnyatā*, or emptiness....all things are utterly interdependent and mutually constructive, to the extent that (what might provisionally have been thought of as) the constituent parts of things are recognized as being so interdependent with other things that they are not really separate things at all. ... In this sense, all things are “empty” of “own-being,” the ability to “own” their own being, to be themselves by themselves. Therefore, not only are humans lacking in selfhood—an inner, constant core constituting the essence of our identity—but all things and all elements whatsoever are also lacking in such a core. The “perfection of wisdom” that most of the Mahayana takes as a basic spiritual goal is to realize this emptiness experientially and to let go of all conscious and subconscious mental constructing of fixed beings and entities where there are none.<sup>600</sup>

While this degree of emptiness seems extremely abstract, if not incomprehensible, the goal of Glassman’s ‘street retreats’ are intended to be practices in taking some of the preliminary steps toward a more profound level of openness and non-judgmental attitude toward others. These

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<sup>599</sup> PSS 263-264 (Conze, 2006:136-137); see also, DS Chapter 4, 11 (Hua, 1974: 91-94, 128-134); King, 2009: 45-47.

<sup>600</sup> King, 2009: 45-46.

practices encourage students to remove any obstacles they might naturally tend to use to separate themselves from others, to stop seeing others as fundamentally different, and to enter into a spontaneous and open relationship in the moment with another person. It is Glassman's belief that his students will gain as much from the homeless they interact with as the homeless will by having such nonjudgmental and engaged friendships with his students.<sup>601</sup> By spending this time living on the streets, meandering without any possessions or money, Glassman's students experience the life of the homeless as a way of relating to them more effectively and compassionately.<sup>602</sup>

Here, the problem of poverty is addressed in a comprehensive manner as a process, much like Herschok outlined above, in which poverty becomes not a problem with the 'other' that needs to be fixed by transferring goods, but the root problem becomes one for all humanity; it is a shared suffering that is as much a problem or failing among the wealthy as it is the poor, requiring a solution for one no less than for the other. This approach causes those in more 'developed' nations to confront the questions, what is wrong with this global system that us as wealthy nations, or as wealthy individuals, allow to continue and even contribute to causing and maintaining such poverty? How or why do we justify the view that the suffering of the poor is theirs alone to end and not also ours? We might follow the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* in asking "why should I not conceive my fellow's body as my own self?"<sup>603</sup> And, proclaim, "I must destroy the pain of another as though it were my own, because it is a pain," for there is no genuine difference

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<sup>601</sup> King, 2009: 54-55.

<sup>602</sup> King, 2009: 51-56.

<sup>603</sup> BCA 43 (Barnett, 1909: 88).

between one's own suffering and that of another—there is only suffering.<sup>604</sup> Greed and overconsumption, hatred and imbalances of power, and ignorance and short-sightedness inevitably result in suffering; and, in the final analysis, the suffering of anyone is of no less value or concern than my own suffering, or the suffering of my friends and family. Rather than arguing over issues of justice and rights, as is a natural tendency to do, the Buddhist approach exemplified by Glassman is to be more concerned with the actual experience of suffering and how to prevent or eliminate it. And yet, ironically, following this course would likely only reduce social and economic injustice, and ensure basic rights such as access to essential material needs, thereby establishing justice.

## 5.8. Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the most significant passages related to the duty of poverty relief found in the Pāli Canon and select Mahāyāna sūtras. We have seen in the Pāli Canon that each social group is given duties concerning poverty from kings to lay followers and monks, while the distinctions between the duties blur in the Mahāyāna texts. In the Mahāyāna tradition relieving the physical suffering of poverty becomes a more central focus as a part of the *bodhisattva* ideal. Because of this most essential doctrine, the virtues of generosity and compassion receive more emphasis, and the relief of the material suffering of others shifts to a position closer to the center of Buddhist thought than it had ever been previously. Damien Keown describes Mahāyāna ethics as a recalibration of the Theravāda Buddhist value-structure, which includes a new emphasis on “the function of moral virtue as a dynamic other-regarding quality, rather than primarily

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<sup>604</sup> BCA 43 (Barnett, 1909: 88).

concerned with personal development and self-control.”<sup>605</sup> This other-regarding quality is nowhere more evident in the Mahāyāna than in the *bodhisattva* ideal. The compassion of the *bodhisattva* is a key Mahāyāna teaching, and one related specifically to poverty and poverty relief.

As Buddhism has spread to new regions, such as China and Tibet, it often opened to reinterpretation in order to fit with the new culture and be applicable to the new populations. Similarly, with the process of globalization, Buddhism has again moved into a new area. Although geographical expansion has not forced this transformation, we can see it as an expansion to a global community—one which wrestles on an existential level with new issues or timeless issues in a new way. I have outlined here some contemporary Buddhist responses to the issues related to this process of globalization, by focusing particularly on the issue of poverty. I have tried to show that there are Buddhists responding to these issues in genuinely Buddhist ways, and that these approaches may be fruitful to enter into a dialogue with as we attempt to analyze and respond to these difficult issues we are facing in the world today.

*Sarvodaya Śramadāna* and Zen Roshi Bernie Glassman’s projects stand out as helpful Engaged Buddhist examples of uniquely or characteristically Buddhist thought applied to issues of poverty and poverty relief. These organizations base their efforts on Buddhist principles, both showing broad comprehensive and multidimensional approaches to poverty and development. The organizational goals go far beyond the narrow view of increasing income to transforming

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<sup>605</sup> Keown, 2001: 130-131. Keown notes that Mahāyāna sources remain conscious of the necessity to develop both of these components as well in order to achieve liberation rather than the bondage which results from only developing one of them.

individuals and broader society to establish a more peaceful, prosperous, sustainable, and stable society.

## 6. Conclusion

The purpose of this dissertation is to introduce the reader to Buddhist engagement with the issue of global poverty. I have outlined the key Buddhist teachings that form the foundation of a Buddhist analysis of this important issue. My focus has been on the authoritative scriptures and texts that represent the tradition and historical perspectives, broadly through both *Theravāda* and *Mahāyāna* schools; I have also made reference to examples of poverty alleviation projects in Buddhist history as well as within the contemporary Socially Engaged Buddhist movement.

These passages outline a remarkably nuanced notion of poverty, as well as clear duties to relieve the suffering of the poor that are associated with the main social groupings. While there is some ambivalence in some of these teachings, there is a line of thought reaching back to the earliest of Buddhist history that comprises a social and economic ethic that aims at fully removing the material suffering of the poor. Moreover, beyond providing a theological justification for modern Buddhist poverty relief projects, these teachings can make significant contributions to the current discussion of poverty and poverty relief among the broader development community. If a poverty relief effort that is expansive enough to confront poverty on a global scale is to be conceived and implemented, it must of necessity speak to the real experiences of the world's poor. If this is so, then translating the concepts into models that cross common cultural boundaries is essential to the endeavor. In this sense, an understanding of the Buddhist conceptions of poverty and poverty relief is highly valuable—and even more so when it bears the promise that current leading conceptions, like the capabilities approach, can be presented in language that can resonate with hundreds of millions of Buddhists throughout the world.

If the main obstacle to eliminating extreme poverty in our time is developing the motivation and political will to do so, then projects like this one become invaluable. Buddhist ethics can contribute a formal structure for conceptualizing poverty that provides support for current leading theories and that contributes to the project of conceiving of these efforts in notions and values that cross cultural boundaries; moreover, it provides a strong motivation to the hundreds of millions of Buddhists in the world to help alleviate the suffering of extreme poverty, while also contributing parables and teachings that will likely also resonate with many more non-Buddhists. Additionally, applying Buddhist principles to conceptions of poverty and poverty relief, such as the non-self teaching, interdependent co-origination, and skilful means, can yield fruitful discussions in the development field that advance studies of the nature of poverty and practical approaches to alleviating it.

### **6.1. Buddhist Social Theory**

Although many Western scholars have ignored the social aspects of the Buddhist tradition in the past, contemporary scholars widely agree that teachings on social, economic, and political matters are evident since its earliest history. Indeed, the Buddha's teachings include numerous teachings on business matters, political advice, and detailed duties and roles of the major social groupings. If there is any doubt about centrality of these teachings, one need only consider the fact that Right Livelihood, the core ethical teachings regarding economic behavior, holds so central a part in the path toward enlightenment as to be listed alongside the more familiar factors of meditation and mental cultivation in the Eightfold Path. Alternatively, one might consider the *bodhisattva* vow to end the suffering of all sentient beings, which is to many Buddhists a

necessary component of enlightenment. These key teachings alone provide sufficient reason to presume that Buddhist ethics is deeply concerned with how one relates to others in society.

In point of fact, as Payutto and Hu have argued, the teachings within the Pāli Canon concerning the interdependence and inter-relatedness of individuals within society constitute a social ethic that clearly identifies duties among the key social groupings of rulers, laity, and *saṅgha*.<sup>606</sup> All are dependent upon one another for their own existence, survival and liberation. They all rely on one another to legitimate and justify their own roles within society, but at a broader level, it is unavoidably within the context of social relationships that one must strive for enlightenment. The ideal conditions identified in the Pāli Canon for an individual to attain enlightenment include a prosperous, safe, and stable society and economy. For the Mahāyāna schools, the *bodhisattvas* also generally require a social context in which to work toward the enlightenment of themselves and others. In the *bodhisattva* ideal it is perhaps the most clear that material well-being contributes to mental and spiritual development, although this point is clearly made in Pāli texts as well.<sup>607</sup>

## 6.2. Economics

In addition to the general political and social teachings that make up Buddhist social ethics, the Buddha taught numerous economic principles that can serve as a foundation for economic ethics as well. The most fundamental of these is Right Livelihood, included in the Eightfold Noble Path. Buddhist economic principles outlined in the Pāli Canon include ethics in income

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<sup>606</sup> Rājavaramuni, 1990; Hu, 2011.

<sup>607</sup> Dhṛ 203-204 (Buddharakkhita, 2010: 54-55).

generation, wealth distribution, labor relations, and work ethics. In brief, the pursuit of wealth is identified as noble and praiseworthy, at least insofar as it is done in an ethical manner and for the purpose of increasing the well-being of oneself and others. Hoarding riches is universally disparaged, while the wealthy who exemplify the virtues of generosity, contentment and equanimity are held as the ideal.

The Buddha taught that craving and attachment lay at the core of all human suffering. Only by overcoming our greed, hatred and delusion can we completely free ourselves from the desire for, and attachment to, those things that lead to our suffering. While Buddhist economics largely developed as a critique of the dominant Western economic models, the two nonetheless share some similarities. Classical economics and the Buddhist tradition both assert that desire is unlimited, but Buddhist economics holds that rather than trying to satisfy desire through consumption, one must overcome the desire for those things that ultimately result in suffering. Moderation is therefore promoted as a key principle, as a means of counteracting unhealthy consumption. While Buddhist economics does not appear to likely replace the dominant economic systems, it does offer helpful critiques of too narrow understandings of human nature and activity.

### **6.3. Buddhist Concepts of Poverty**

An initial distinction to understand about the Buddhist approach to poverty is that some level of voluntary poverty or simplicity is promoted as a beneficial if not necessary step along the path to enlightenment. For this reason, those who enter the *saṅgha* take vows of homelessness and possessionlessness as a means to overcoming greed and cultivating a sense of contentment.

Having taken these vows, the *saṅgha* becomes the ideal recipient of meritorious gifts or alms as well as a conscience of society by modelling alternative values based on Buddhist virtues that counterbalance the dominant hierarchical structure in society that is based on wealth and social or political standing.

The Pāli Canon and various Mahāyāna sūtras describe poverty-as-deprivation as a source of suffering, and as such as an obstacle to ultimate liberation. Poverty is an evil first and foremost because it prevents the sufferer from being open to the enlightening message of the *Dhamma*. Furthermore, poverty excludes the sufferers from the social relationships and behaviors that are most often associated with generating karmic merit—for example, donations to the *saṅgha* and oftentimes the opportunity to join the *saṅgha*, which is forbidden to debtors. And, the problem of poverty is even more severe. Due to the interdependent nature of social relationships, when poverty reaches systemic levels it leads all within the society down a spiral towards a more bestial character in which enlightenment eventually becomes virtually impossible in the present life.

### **6.3.1. The Capabilities Approach**

While the notions of poverty conveyed in Buddhist scripture most often fit within the category of absolute material poverty, certain key passages that deal with issues of poverty also convey notions of poverty very much in line with the capabilities approach, similar to what is promoted currently by UNDP, and the Subjective Well-Being Approach. This comprehensive and multidimensional view of poverty focuses not merely on material goods or income, but also on social relationships and practices, as well as ultimately on mental cultivation and spiritual

development toward final liberation. *Sarvōdaya Śramadāna* exemplifies this approach to poverty relief by moving the goal beyond material sufficiency or prosperity to cultivating the virtue of *dāna*- generosity or giving—when they help neighboring villages to prosper. Poverty then includes spiritual or moral poverty as well; this promotes an active generosity and compassion toward others in need as final objectives.

### **6.3.2. Non-Self teaching**

A key teaching at the core of Buddhism that has major implications to notions of poverty and poverty relief is the non-self teaching. This is one of the most important of the contributions that a Buddhist analysis can make to discussions of poverty and poverty relief. One of the major sources of suffering is the mistaken belief in a self that is an independent and permanent entity or phenomenon. Buddhists hold that what we think of as one's permanent self is really a constantly changing flow of thoughts, feelings, physical particles, etc. When we take any or all of those as a permanent self, we suffer. Again, just as there is no independent or permanent 'I' that is an angry person, neither is there one that is poor. Similarly, poverty is not a permanent or independent thing, but rather is a process. Impoverishment is merely one of many conditions that can be changed, even changed permanently. The non-self teaching is also applied to removing the conceptual framework that differentiates my 'self' from another who is suffering, as exemplified by Glassman's street retreat and the dissolution of the giver, receiver and gift model.

## 6.4. Poverty Relief in Buddhist History

Throughout its history, Buddhists have confronted poverty and promoted compassion and altruism in addressing the social and political conditions that result in poverty. The prevention and elimination of systemic or widespread poverty is primarily the responsibility of kings or governments. They are told to give material goods directly to the poor, and to invest in the economy and otherwise contribute to a prosperous, safe, and stable economy. A key example of the Buddhist ideal regarding kingship is Ashoka, who is said to have given food, shelter and clothing to the poor, as well as to have undertaken construction projects to provide for the poor and the travellers.

The *saṅgha* have also instructed the kings and laity in poverty relief, and have also themselves engaged in public works and social improvement projects. Throughout China and Japan monasteries often played a central role in such projects, including providing education, medical supplies and services, loans, and other material goods to those in need. Additionally, monk-led development programs have been implemented in Thailand in modern times.

### 6.4.1. Engaged Buddhism

The contemporary engaged Buddhist movement offers the best examples from the Buddhist tradition of Buddhist approaches to poverty relief. As a result of globalization, poverty around the world, not only in one's own community, has become a major concern for everyone.

Engaged Buddhists draw on the teachings of their own tradition for tools for analyzing poverty and developing approaches to relieving poverty. *Sarvōdaya Śramadāna* and Bernie Glassman's

Greyston Mandala exemplify Socially Engaged Buddhists approach to put these key Buddhist virtues to work in alleviating poverty.

## **6.5. Further Research**

The purpose of this dissertation has been to shed light on Buddhist teachings relating to poverty and poverty relief in hopes of indicating initial suggestions of what Buddhist social and economic ethics can contribute to contemporary discussions of this supremely important global issue. If a global ethic of poverty and poverty relief is to develop, it must not only account for one particular perspective, but must also agree with the perspectives and experiences of the various cultures around the world. While the Buddhist tradition has historically had little to do with discussions in the West of how to conceive of poverty and poverty relief or economic development, the tradition offers insights and principles for analysis that contribute to a rich and comprehensive understanding of poverty and poverty relief, and for at least this reason, it deserves a place in dialogue concerning these issues. My hope is that these pages have sufficiently uncovered the key teachings and principles that outline a Buddhist approach to poverty and will help move a Buddhist analysis more fully into dialogue with the global community as much as also help to move the pressing concerns of world poverty more fully into discussions of Buddhist ethics. I have noted that the non-self teaching and the teaching on emptiness offer significant contributions to analyses of poverty and wealth and the processes that bring about impoverishment and development. This is an area that is ripe for future research. This has been a preliminary attempt at a comprehensive glimpse at the Buddhist texts related to the issue that can serve as a foundation to a Buddhist analysis of poverty; there is far more that

can be gathered concerning historical examples and as texts continue to be translated, my hope is that more attention will be paid to how they might improve our understanding of how they deal with the issue of poverty, or what they imply about how it has been dealt with in the past.

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