

# ACOMPREHENSIVEBUDDHISTAPPROACH TO RESTORATION OF SUSTAINABLE SOCIETYTHROUGHECONOMICSTABILITY

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## ABSTRACT

*The formidable global challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are the battle against alleviation of poverty and economic instability. Peaceful sustainability in the contemporary society in the new millennium is appallingly overwhelmed by corrupt governance, avariciousness, selfishness, detrimental trading, violation of human rights, racism, unequal distribution of resources, poverty, etc. and these conditions have become worse with intense covetousness (abhijjhā), intense hatred (byāpāda), intense delusion (adhi moha), wrong views (micchādiṭṭhi). Consequently, all this has given rise to various social conflicts which jeopardize peaceful and harmonious sustainability in the society. As elaborated in the suttas like Aggañña and Kūtadanta, poverty and unequal distribution of wealth are considered the main reasons for various social conflicts. Obviously, wealth is not denounced and poverty is not welcome in Buddhism. According to Kūtadanta Sutta, vices and moral decline caused due to poverty proliferates suffering in diverse aspects destroying social, peace, equality and economic stability. The Suttās like Kūtadanta, Cakkavattisihanāda, Siṅgālaka, Vyagghapajja, Adiya, Anana, etc. reveal a comprehensive approach to restoration of sustainability and economic stability in a society. According to the Appaka Sutta, many persons, when acquiring lavish wealth through unrighteous*

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*means, become intoxicated, heedless and greedy for sensual pleasures and mistreat other persons. This causes conflicts in even in individual, family, professional and economic life. In this context, the significant distinction between one's needs and wants should be recognized. Needs should be fulfilled and wants should be limited and reduced as they are insatiable and boundless and the continuous appeasement of wants or desires will bring intense and destructive sufferings, miseries, stress, etc. to society, environment and the world. Hence, the principal purpose of this paper is to expose a comprehensive approach based on the utility of Buddhist economic policies and strategies through governance to restore a sustainable society.*

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The Buddhist teachings on economics are scattered throughout the Scriptures among teachings on other subjects. A teaching on mental training, for example, may include guidelines for economic activity, because in real life these things are all interconnected. Thus, if we want to find the Buddhist teachings on economics, we must extract them from teachings on other subjects.

Although the Buddha never specifically taught about the subject of economics, teachings about the four requisites – food, clothing, shelter and medicine -- occur throughout the Pali Canon. In essence, all of the teachings concerning the four requisites are teachings on economics.

The basic model of economic activity often represents in economic textbooks thus: unlimited wants are controlled by scarcity; scarcity requires choice; choice involves an opportunity cost and the final goal is maximum satisfaction. The fundamental concepts occurring in this model: want, choice, consumption and satisfaction – describe the basic activities of our lives from an economic perspective. These concepts are based on certain assumptions about human nature. Unfortunately, the assumptions modern economists make about human nature are somewhat confused.

Buddhism accepts that accumulation of wealth should be through righteous and non-violent means. The two terms used to describe how it should be done namely, ‘*dhammena*’ (righteously) ‘*asahasena*’ (nonviolently) could be co-terminus. As pointed out in

the Pattakamma Sutta first among the four pleasant and desirable factors in the world is accumulation of wealth righteously, and in this context, too, the importance of engaging in production in a righteous manner is thus emphasized. The Dhammapada says that a righteous person is he who does no wrong either for his own sake or for the sake of another or does no wrong through the desire for one's wealth or even a kingdom. It has already been shown above that righteous livelihood is to make one's livelihood in a virtuous manner. Hence, it is seen becoming virtuous is one way of being righteous in accumulating wealth.

### 1. WEALTH AND POVERTY IN BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE

Wealth is not condemned and poverty is not welcomed in Buddhism. Amassing plentiful wealth and the wealth collected through unrighteous means are rejected. Wholesome use of wealth earned through right livelihood and forthright effort is encouraged. The Buddha says that poverty (*dāḷiddiya*) is miserable in the world for a person who enjoys sensuality (AN. 6.45 (3). WPB. p.914). This means that poverty is not acceptable as it is associated with *dukkha*. The term '*dukkha*' has been translated into English as suffering, misery, dissatisfaction, frustration, etc. 'Dukkha' in the context of poverty does not imply any significant distinction between mundane suffering (*lokika*) and some other transcendental sort (*lokuttara*). Hence, 'ill-being' is sometimes the best term to be used in this context. According to the Kuṭadanta Sutta (DN. 5. WPB. p. 135), vices and moral decline caused due to poverty proliferates suffering in diverse aspects jeopardizing social peace and equality.

The suttas like Kuṭadanta and Cakkavattisihanāda reveal that social peace, equality, justice, harmony are harmed and violence and crimes increase due to moral degradation committed through vices impelled by poverty (absence of adequate wealth and resources) (DN. 26. WPB. p. 403). According to Buddhist teachings, eradication of poverty should not be understood as the amassing of bountiful wealth, more desires and wants which are to be satisfied by more consumables and luxuries. In this context, the significant distinction between one's needs and wants should be recognized. Needs – four requisites (food, clothes, shelter and medicine) should be fulfilled and wants should be limited and reduced as

they are insatiable and boundless and the continuous appeasement of wants or desires will bring intense and destructive sufferings, miseries, stress, etc. to individual, family, society, environment and the world.

## 2. BUDDHIST ATTITUDE ON POVERTY

Over 3 billion people worldwide live in what is termed as absolute poverty, and this means that they have no adequate money, food or shelter. On average, 25,000 children die daily of effects from poverty. Of the estimated 2.2 billion children worldwide, 1 billion live in poverty. According to Buddhism, poverty involves suffering which causes destruction of equality and peace in the society. As a philosophy of living which advocates the elimination of suffering, Buddhism does not appreciate poverty. Buddhism values detachment towards material goods and commends contented life (*santussako*), few duties (*appkicco*) light or simple living (*sallahukavutti*), easy to support (*subharo*) as mentioned in the Karaṇiya Metta Sutta (Sn. 1.8 WPB. p. 179), fewness of wishes, having less wants or fewness of desires (*appicchatā*) (AN. 114 (8). WPB. p. 987) as a virtue and balanced living (*samajīvatā*) (AN. 8.54 (4). WPB. p. 1194). Poverty is the non-possession of the basic material requirements for leading a decent life free from hunger, malnutrition, disease, bad health, loss of shelter, absence of other preliminary facilities for standard living, etc. Buddhism recognizes the significance of the fulfillment of the minimum material needs for a decent living even in the context of the aspirants of its higher spiritual goal. For instance, the four requisites for one who has renounced the worldly life are (i) food sufficient to alleviate hunger and maintain good health, (ii) clothing to protect the body and to be socially decent, (iii) shelter for protection from rain, winds, etc. and for the undisturbed engagement with mind development and (iv) medicine sufficient to maintain health care, cure and prevent illnesses. As the Andha Sutta mentions, some persons are like the completely blind (*andho*) since they do not have the vision to improve their material wealth not yet acquired and increase wealth already acquired and also do not have the vision to lead morally raised life knowing wholesome and unwholesome qualities, blameworthy and blameless qualities, inferior and superior qualities and dark

and bright qualities. Some are like the one-eyed (*ekacakkhu*) since they have the vision to improve their wealth not yet acquired and increase wealth already acquired but they do not see the necessity to lead a morally raised life knowing wholesome and unwholesome qualities, blameworthy and blameless qualities, inferior and superior qualities and dark and bright qualities. Those who are two-eyed (*dvicakkhu*) are likened to have the vision to improve both (AN. 3.29 (9). WPB. p. 224). Only the increase or improvement of material conditions is not encouraged in Buddhism and a causal relationship exists between material poverty and ethical or social deterioration as the Cakkavattisihanāda Suttas exposes.

Thus, poverty, from this point of view does not involve the absence of an abundance of goods that stimulates the insatiable greed of man. The Buddha in the Dhana Sutta (AN. 7.5 (5). WPB. p. 1000 – 1001) appreciates the seven kinds of ‘wealth’ – (1) the wealth of confidence – *saddhā* (placing confidence in the Enlightenment of the Buddha), (2) the wealth of moral conduct (developing one’s character through the establishment of the five precepts), (3) the wealth of moral shame (being ashamed of bodily, verbal and mental misconduct and acquiring bad and unwholesome qualities), (4) the wealth of moral dread (dreading of bodily, verbal and mental misconduct and acquiring bad and unwholesome qualities), (5) the wealth of learning (the teachings that are good in the beginning, good in the middle and good in the end, with right meaning and phrasing that proclaim the perfectly complete and pure spiritual life), (6) the wealth of generosity (sacrificing one’s possessions for the benefit of others devoid of miserliness and delighting in giving and sharing) and the (7) wealth of wisdom (insight into three characteristics of existence – *anicca, dukkha* and *anatta*) (AN. 7.6 (6). WPB. p. 1000 – 1001). According to the Ugga Sutta, only the material types of wealth can be taken away by fire, water, kings, thieves and unpleasing heirs. However, the above seven types of wealth cannot be taken away by fire, water, kings, thieves and unpleasing heirs (AN. 7.7 (7). WPB. p. 1001 – 1002). Thus, the absence of the seven types of ‘noble wealth’ is reckoned to be ‘true poverty’ that is even more miserable than that resulting from the lack of material resources.

Therefore, from the Buddhist perspective poverty cannot be measured purely on the basis of the material criterion of the quantity of goods people consume. While insisting on the importance of the fulfillment of the basic material needs Buddhism places a high value on the cultivation of the psychological attitude called *santutṭhi* (contentment). According to the teaching of the Buddha, the greatest wealth is contentment (*santutṭhiparamam dhanam*) (Dhp. Ch.15. V.204. p.177). Therefore, in a nutshell, poverty, according to Buddhist teachings, is the absence of material necessities that obstruct a decent living endowed with light living (*sallavukavutti*) and balanced living (*samajīvatā*) through right livelihood (*sammā ājīva*).

### 3. PSYCHOLOGICAL CAUSES OF POVERTY

The roots of all the unwholesome actions that cause social issues such as poverty, inequality, injustice are defilements which are the noxious psychological causes. The Buddhist analysis of the deep-rooted psychological causes of a social issue like poverty has so far been discussed on the basis of the noxious trio – passion, aversion and delusion. For instance, one of the most detrimental psychological causes is the overindulgence in sensual pleasures that leads to overconsumption of material wealth and resources by rulers and minority class in a society making the majority of people stricken with poverty related suffering. Many rulers, their supporting elite class and officials exploit the people and lead a life of extreme gratification of sensual desires in the lap of luxury at the expense of common masses. The other psychological reason is that these rulers and officials bear no genuine attitudes to solve basic problems confronted by the countrymen. Instead, out of avariciousness and covetousness (*abhijjhā*) – two psychological reasons, great wealth and abundance of resources are collected, unimaginable amount of money is amassed through evil means and deposited in banks, palatial mansions furnished with extravagant facilities are built, vehicles of immensely expensive values are used, lands and property of great value even on foreign lands are bought and various illegal means of amassing wealth are manipulated while responsibilities to the society are neglected and various forms of oppression and deprivation in the life of people such as unequal distribution of wealth, exploitation of wealth by a minority plunging

the entire country into poverty are committed. The Raṭṭhapāla Sutta points out how heads of state engage in destructive and aggressive wars due to their insatiable greed for power and wealth and bring destruction upon themselves as well as many others: A king wins territories through aggression as far as the surrounding ocean. Yet not being contented with that, he desires territories even beyond the shores (MN. 82. WPB. p. 689). This Sutta mentions of wars that originate from aggressive intentions of greedy heads of state, a phenomenon that must have been frequently experienced in all parts of the ancient world.

The other psychological causes for individual, family or people to fall into poverty are their lack of enthusiasm, laziness, mental languor, sluggishness, lethargy, narrow-mindedness, lack of intellectual potentials, etc. Due to one or more of these reasons, individual or family does not strive hard in their work, business or any activities of livelihood as revealed in the Singālovāda Sutta (DN. 31. WPB. p. 463), and this leads to a stagnant nature of life that brings about no progress of economic stability or loss of wealth. According to the Najīrati Sutta (SN. 76.6. WPB.p.136), six faults in the world where wealth and property do not persist are (i) laziness, (ii) heedlessness, (iii) lack of action, (iv) lack of restraint, (v) sleepiness and (vi) sloth. A householder should avoid these six faults that dissipate wealth and goods.

Among the twelve causes of unsuccessful man exposed in the Parābhava Sutta, certain psychological causes that conduce to decline, loss and destruction of wealth and balanced living can be taken.

- i. Averseness to Dhamma
- ii. Preference to wicked persons and averseness to virtuous persons
- iii. Fondness of sleep, fondness of company, being indolent, lazy and irritable
- iv. Ungrateful to old parents
- v. Deception a brahman or ascetic or any other mendicant by falsehood

- vi. Enjoyment of luxuries alone
- vii. Being proud of birth, of wealth or clan, and despising of one's own kinsmen
- viii. Being a rake, a drunkard, a gambler and squandering all one earns
- ix. Not being contented with one's own wife and being with harlots and the wives of others
- x. Being past one's youth, taking a young wife and to be unable to sleep for jealousy of her
- xi. Placing in authority a woman addicted to drinking and squandering or a man of a like behavior
- xii. Being of noble birth, with vast ambition and of slender means and craving for rulership (Sn. 1.6. PTS. p.13).

In order to eradicate poverty that harms equality and peace and to develop economic stability, these unwholesome psychological frailties should be eliminated.

#### 4. SOCIAL CAUSES OF POVERTY AND MORAL DETERIORATION

The Buddhist teaching has been realistic enough to recognize certain proximate causes associated with the material conditions of life – external causes that lead to poverty and its related issues. Material deprivation is seen as a key source of conflict that jeopardizes equality and peace. In other words, poverty is considered a root cause of crime in the society. According to the *Cakkavattisihanāda Sutta* (DN. 26. WPB. p. 395) and the *Kūṭadanta Sutta* (DN. 5. WPB. p. 133 ), the roots of conflicts lie not only in individual consciousness but also exist in the very structure of society that encourages those roots to grow. These Suttas point out that when the economic order of society is of inequality, injustice and vicious economic disparities; a substantial section of the community is reduced to poverty and people rebel against such social order. According to the *Kūṭadanta Sutta*, the failure on the part of the ruler (state) to look after the essential needs of the people drive the people who are deprived of their needs to resort to crime and rebellion against the governance (state). The imposition of penalties to deal with such



a situation does not produce the desired results. According to the Cakkavattisihanāda Sutta (DN. 26, WPB. p.395), any social order that does not address the problem of economic poverty creates conditions for social unrest resulting eventually in the total decline of the moral standards of society causing a lot of social issues, and the end result of it could be disastrous riots or wars.

When poverty or economic deprivation is eradicated, peace, equality, happiness and coexistence are established. According to the above event mentioned in the Sutta, wealth and resources to support trade, agriculture and other occupations should be distributed and proper salaries should be paid to those engaged in occupations adequate to lead good life and this will eradicate material disparities and vices caused by them and bring about social equality, peace and happiness in the country.

#### 5. ACQUISITION OF BOUNTIFUL WEALTH

As the Aputtaka Sutta discusses (SN. 3.19 (9). WPB. p. 182), King Kosola, having conveyed an heirless fortune to the royal palace, talks to the Buddha about a wealthy money-lending householder who died in Sāvatti: Even though he was a money-lending householder, his enjoyment of food was like this: he ate broken rice and pickle brine. His enjoyment of clothing was like this: he wore three lengths of hempen cloth. His enjoyment of a vehicle was like this: he rode in a dilapidated little cart with a canopy of leaves.

The Buddha further says that when a person of integrity acquires lavish wealth, he provides for his own pleasure and satisfaction, for the pleasure and satisfaction of his parents, the pleasure and satisfaction of his wife and children; the pleasure and satisfaction of his slaves, servants, and assistants; and the pleasure and satisfaction of his friends. He institutes for priests and contemplatives offerings of supreme aim, heavenly, resulting in happiness, leading to heaven. When his wealth is properly put to use, kings do not make off with it, thieves do not make off with it, fire does not burn it, water does not sweep it away, and hateful heirs do not make off with it. Thus his wealth, properly put to use, goes to a good use and not to waste.

## 6. BALANCED LIVELIHOOD

As the *Dīghajānu (Vyagghapajja) Sutta* reveals a householder knowing his income and expenses should lead a balanced life, neither wasteful nor miserly, knowing that thus his income will stand in excess of his expenses, but not his expenses in excess of his income (AN. 8.54 (4). WPB. p. 1195). The four sources for the increase of collected wealth through right livelihood or right living, namely: (1) avoidance of debauchery, (2) avoidance of drunkenness, (3) non-indulgence in gambling, (4) friendship, companionship and intimacy with the good should be adopted to lead a simple and balanced life (AN. 8.54 (4). WPB. p. 1195). According to the above Sutta, a householder lives well in the present life when he is active in doing good, heedful and circumspective, equanimous in livelihood and careful with his savings (*uṭṭhātā kammadheyyesu, appamatto vidhānavā; Samam kappeti jīvikam sambhatam anurakkhati*) (AN. 8.54 (4). WPB. p. 1194).

Earning of wealth righteously and right uses of wealth conduce to balanced living. As the *Siṅgalovāda Sutta* illustrates, the Buddha gives instructions to the young householder, *Sigālaka* on how wealth is earned righteously and the four ways to spend one's wealth by a wise man endowed with virtue in order to lead a fruitful, wholesome and balanced life. They are explicated through similes thus. The wise one who is endowed with virtue will shine like a beacon-fire. He gathers wealth like a bee gathering honey or like ants piling up their hill (*paṇḍito sīlasampanno jalam aggīva bhāsati, Bhoge samharamānassa, bhamarasseva iriyato; Bhogā sannicayaṃ yanti, vammikovupacīyati.*) (DN. 31. WPB. p. 466). The four ways to spend wealth mean that wealth can be divided into four portions (*Catudhā vibhaje bhoge, sa ve mittāni ganthati*). He enjoys one portion of wealth, with two portions he manages his work or profession or business (investment), the fourth portion is to be deposited to be used in times of misfortune and the last part for fulfilling obligations (*Ekena bhoge bhunṅheyya, dvihi kammaṃ payojaye; Catutthaṅca nidhāpeyya, āpadāsu bhavissatī ti*) (DN. 31. WPB. p. 466). The right uses of wealth that has been righteously obtained are also conducive to balanced living according to the *Pattakamma Sutta* (AN. 4.61 (1). WPB. p. 449). Wealth should

be used for dependents, for overcoming misfortunes, for giving donations and for making the five offerings – to kin, guests, the departed, kings and the gods – this has been recommended by the virtuous who live spiritually (*Bhuttā bhogā bhatā bhaccā, vitinnā āpadāsu me, uddhaggā dakkhiṇā dinnā, atho pañcabalikatā, upatthitā sīlavanto, saññatā brahmacārayo*) (AN. 4.61 (1). WPB. p. 449). According to the Najīrati Sutta, six faults in the world where wealth and property do not persist are (i) laziness, (ii) heedlessness, (iii) lack of action, (iv) lack of restraint, (v) sleepiness and (vi) sloth. A householder should avoid these six faults that dissipate wealth and goods (SN. 76.6. WPB.p.136).

All the above factors that conduce to healthy, wealthy and balanced existence are prerequisites to meditation as the mind of a person who leads such a balanced and righteous life is not rigid, unkind, ruthless, rough, wicked, cruel and immoral but happy, content, less agitated, pliable and supple. The Vyagghapajja Sutta exposes the conditions of worldly progress (AN. 8.54 (4), WPB. p. 1194). The same concept is elucidated in the Pattakamma Sutta (AN. 4.61 (1). WPB. p. 449).

The four conditions conduce to a householder's weal and happiness in this very life.

- i. The accomplishment of persistent effort (*uṭṭhāna-sampadā*)
- ii. The accomplishment of watchfulness (*ārakkha-sampadā*)
- iii. Good friendship (*kalyāṇamittatā*)
- iv. Balanced livelihood (*sama-jīvikatā*)

According to the accomplishment of persistent effort (*uṭṭhāna-sampadā*) as revealed in the Vyagghapajja Sutta (AN. 8.54 (4), WPB. p. 1194), householder by whatsoever activity earns his living, whether by farming, by trading, by rearing cattle, by archery, by service under the king, or by any other kind of craft — at that he becomes skillful and is not lazy. He is endowed with the power of discernment as to the proper ways and means; he is able to carry out and allocate duties. As per the accomplishment of watchfulness (*ārakkha-sampadā*), a householder whatsoever wealth is in possession of, obtained by dint of effort, collected by strength of

arm, by the sweat of his brow, justly acquired by right means — such husbands well by guarding and watching so that kings would not seize it, thieves would not steal it, fire would not burn it, water would not carry it away, nor ill-disposed heirs remove it.

## 7. ABOLITION OF POVERTY AND RESTORATION OF ECONOMIC STABILITY

A householder with a large income were to lead a wretched life, there would be those who say this person will die like a starveling. Just as in the case of a great tank with four inlets and outlets, if a man should close the inlets and open the outlets and there should be no adequate rainfall, decrease of water is to be expected in that tank, and not an increase. The four sources for the increase of amassed wealth are Abstinence from debauchery, Abstinence from drunkenness, Non-indulgence in gambling and Friendship, companionship and intimacy with the good.

Just as in the case of a great tank with four inlets and four outlets, if a person were to open the inlets and close the outlets, and there should also be adequate rainfall, an increase in water is certainly to be expected in that tank and not a decrease, even so these four conditions are the sources of increase of amassed wealth.

Therefore, poverty or absence of adequate wealth, property and resources should be eliminated through the eradication of psychological, ethical, social and kammic factors that conduce to non-possession of wealth and resources as explicated in the above suttas. Dissipation, destruction and loss of wealth already acquired should be eliminated through the elimination of the Six Channels of Dissipation of Wealth (*cha bhogānaṃ apāyamukhāni*) as explicated in the Siṅgālovāda Sutta, immoral behaviour that wastes wealth as discussed in the Suttas like Pattakamma, Parābhava, Vyagghapajja, etc. and refrain from the association of evil friends or foes in friendly guise (*amittā mittapatirūpakā*) and association of good friends (*suhadamitto*) revealed in the Siṅgālovāda Sutta (DN. 31. WPB. p.464 – 466).

Buddhism which neither appreciates poverty nor appreciates attachment towards material wealth commends contented life (*santussako*), few duties (*appkicco*) light or simple living

(*sallahukavutti*), easy to support (*subharo*), fewness of wishes or having less wants or fewness of desires (*appicchatā*) (AN. 114 (8). WPB. p.987) as a virtue and balanced living (*samajīvatā*) endowed with wholesome moral deportment. In Buddhism, poverty is termed as suffering for people who enjoy sensual pleasures as it disturbs individual, social and spiritual peaceful existence.

## 8. CONCLUSION

The major part of our lives is taken up with economic activities. If economics is to have any real part to play in the resolution of the problems confronted by mankind, then all economic activities, whether production, working, spending or consuming is to help create true well-being and develop the potential for a good and meaningful life that is something that we are capable of doing. The essence of Buddhist economics lies here, in ensuring that economic activity simultaneously enhances the quality of our lives. All the psychological and social factors that are directly or indirectly conducive to poverty and dissipation of wealth should be eradicated to establish stability of wholesome wealth and wholesome economy in Buddhist perspective. Therefore, the applicability of above mentioned teachings in Buddhism is extremely significant for the sustainable development in the society. It is through the righteous economic stability that morally civilized society is developed and sustainable peace and equality that establish justice, harmony, human rights, etc. are restored.

## ABBREVIATIONS

AN	: Aṅguttara Nikāya
CDB	: The Connected Discourses of the Buddha (Saṃyutta Nikāya)
Dhp	: Dhammapada
DN	: Dīgha Nikāya
GD	: The Group of Discourses (Suttanipāta)
Khp	: Khuddakapāṭa

- KN : Khuddaka Nikāya  
LDB : The Long Discourses of the Buddha (Dīgha Nikāya)  
MLDB : The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha  
(Majjhima Nikāya)  
NDB : The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha  
(Aṅguttara Nikāya)  
PTS : Pāli Text Society, London  
SN : Saṃyutta Nikāya  
WPB : Wisdom Publications. Boston

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