A sustainable Buddhist economic approach

Ariyajyoti Bhikkhu

Introduction

In the olden days the economics is simple yet sustainable where people totally could collect their basic necessities of food, clothing, house and medicine easily, whereas in 21st it becomes over exploitation of the nature. My grandmother told me in their days; they did slash and burn cultivation from where they could reap rice, vegetable for curry, cotton for cloth and dress and various kinds of grains. Due to their abundance of fruit and vegetable, they sold for buying dry fish and salt. For lighting lamp they collected oil from a certain kind of tree and for housing they built house with trees and bamboo, which were easily available. This life is indeed a primitive one but an independent lifestyle unlike today, a stressful life.

How the human beings reached from the primitive economic life to modern global society is an interesting thing to show concisely from the economical perspective. Having built the country with good infrastructure, they coined the term development in 1756. The Industrial Revolution in Europe during late 18th Century, the material products are more than ever people’s consummation. To instinct the people desire they found ‘advertisement’ is the best tool. However, with the development within the country has no value at all without having any worldwide network in terms of free trade, free flow of capital and investment, as a result the term globalization was derived in 1951. It is needless to say the invention of sophisticate technology, scientific development in various fields particularly within the last four decades. In the development of economics history, followed by industrial Revolution, the popular theory of capitalism was coined in 1826 with the idea of owning individually without any government intervention. In 1887 Karl Marx introduced Marxism with the idea of driving out poor and rich distinction in the society but failed to maintain despite of consensus due to the revival of Capitalism interrelated with demonic idea of consumerism founded in 1944 of spending and earning as much as an individual wants.
In 21st Century human beings are now in the realm of capitalism, globalization and consumerism. So far, what benefit have got by men, living beings and nature from those popular theories? Instead of well-being of living beings what we called development, innovation, and capitalism even made worse us by radiating greenhouse gas, melting ice, raising temperature and sea-leveled, exploiting resources, polluting water, and destroying the nature. Since, the modern economics is bringing such worse situation; can we regard as beneficial, and well-being for all? Can we expect the bright future of human beings who does not concern any ethical or environmental concern? The developed countries are convincing, capitalism and globalism are the only way to develop the underdeveloped countries. Indeed, one has to understand those kinds of slogans are simply for their personal benefit; in the real case it does not happen so. Rich countries become richer and the poor countries become even poorer.

Not only that the demonic religion of consumerism is even diminishing the common sense, ethical value and universal well-beings. It is not concerned with nature, but only money, profit for the personal selfish gain driven by three unwholesome cognitive behavioural thought of greed, hatred and delusion.

Therefore, in this short writing, I will be introducing the Buddhist sustainable economics with universal concern of ethics, common sense and well-beings of all living beings. At first it will discuss about earning, then saving, and spending. In the last part what is the purpose of earning money in Buddhist Economics Philosophy will be enlightened.

**Earning**

Attempting to define the term economics would not be an easy task. Simply it is the process of production, income, and investment of the resources. In the Merriam Webster Dictionary, the term economics is a science concerned with the process or system by which goods and services are produced, sold and bought. Some even define it in terms of welfare, thus representing economics as a means of studying how through increased production the standard of living of people could be improved. (Malalasekera 5,7). Alfred Marshall sees it
not only as a study of wealth but also as a study of man. From personal definition, Buddhist economics is earning, saving and spending with universal concerned. The Buddha is not interested in promulgating specific economics theory because his purpose of earning livelihood is totally different from the modern economics destination of becoming billionaire and not more than that. The Buddha’s concern was more on the ethical aspect of the economy rather than on the theory or subtle mechanism involved in it. (Malalasekera V, 7).

Since earning is a composite part of economics; it is going to discuss what earning includes and relates with the teaching of the Buddha on special advice to the lay-communities. Without earning their livelihood, people will suffer from poverty. Since ‘poverty is suffering for those enjoyer of sense pleasure’ (dāliddiyaṃ dukkham kāmabhogino. An.ii. 309), it should not appear in the society because it leads to the moral devaluation (adhamma). According to Aggaññā Sutta (DN.26) beginning with poverty, there leads to committing stealing, telling lies and adultery. If poverty arises in the society, it is the sole duty of the ruler to provide his subjects with food and necessities requisites with proper policy as we can see the model of a universal monarchical duty to serve the people as his own sons. Ambedkar comments for poverty reduction quoting from Cakkavattisīhanāda Sutta. (DN. 26)

Now let the Majesty the King grant seed and fodder to those in his country who take up agriculture and cattle breeding. Let majesty grant capital to those in his country who undertake commerce. Let his majesty dispense wages and food to those in his country who undertake the royal service. (Ambedkar: Vol.3)

How should one earn his livelihood with a sustainable mode of earning? In the case of poverty or earning observing the morality will be a hindrance from general consensus. In fact, ethical principle is given more priority in Buddhism (dhammakā dhammaladdhā. DN.iii.237). The Buddha further taught a universal well-being way of earning one’s livelihood in Vāṇijjā Sutta, five trades ought not to be plied by a lay-disciple… trade in weapons, trade in human beings, trade in flesh, trade in intoxicants and trade in poison. (AN.i.183). Due to exclusiveness of monk’s livelihood, further wrong livelihoods are also found both lay and monastic community.
And what, monks, is wrong mode of livelihood? Trickery, cajolery, insinuating, dissembling, rapacity for gain upon gain... And what, monks, is the right side of merit that ripens unto cleaving to a new birth? Herein monks, an ariyan disciple, by getting rid of wrong livelihood, earns his living by a right mode of living. (MN.iii.119)

The above passage shows Buddha’s concern always not to deviate from the yardstick of ethical value with universal concern. While the Buddha taught to abstain from five kinds of trades, modern economist will severely condemn. Indeed, it is simply due to their short-sighted vision, how is it? The main purpose is to abstain from harming any living beings and the actions which lead to destruction, also should be restrained as a right-livelihood in Buddhism. The second category of abstaining from wrong livelihood is the main problem in these days. It does not matter for cheating, deceiving, or trickery, if there is a way to get economics possession.

This is the big difference from the modern capitalist theory, no matter who will die, destroy and vanish if one can get benefit from it. Therefore, Ambedkar sees, the means adopted by the Communists are equally clear, short and swift. They are (1) Violence and (2) Dictatorship of the Proletariat whereas the means adopted by the Buddha were to convert a man by changing his moral disposition to follow the path voluntarily. As the popular saying remarked by John Dewey, ‘the end justifies the means’. According to modern economist, acquiring is the main concern without bothering anything else simply fulfilling their selfish pockets. Due to setting up many industries, they are emitting lots of carbon dioxide as a result polluting the atmosphere. Moreover, since they only concern with profit, thus, they produce lots of commodity. As a result raw materials are using extensively and the most valuable source are the renewable resources, which take millions of year to form, is exploiting by extreme capitalist.

People may wonder the Buddha has nothing to do with business. Surprisingly, there is entrepreneur skill found in Cūḷaseṭṭhi Jātaka (No.4)

One day the Bodhisatta saw a dead mouse lying on the road, and noticing the position of stars, he said, “Any decent young fellow with his wits about him has only to pick up the mouse and he will made money”. A young man called Cūḷantevāsika, hearing this, picked up the mouse and sold it for a farthing to a tavern for their cat to eat. With the
farthing he bought molasses and drinking water for flower gatherers. Later he gathered branches and leaves blown down by the wind in the king’s garden and sold them to a potter for a large sum of money. He entered into friendship with a land-trader and a sea trader and by using the information he obtained from them, he was able to make two hundred thousand pieces by means of skillful and far–sighted business dealings. He then got married with the Bodhisatta’s daughter, the minor merchant.

In this story, there are lots of entrepreneur skills taught in Business School found as pointed out by Ven. S. Dhammika in his Guide to Buddhism: A-Z (p-77)

1. He has the ability to take note the expert opinion and ready to start how seemingly unpromising.
2. He did need analysis, offer a loss leader and value added service.
3. He has ability to see opportunity where others saw only a problem and to motivate people.
4. He used networking a loyalty program and first hand market information.
5. Market manipulation though may consider unethical in today.
6. He took risk with confidence finally succeed
7. Reinforce his confidence building strategy for maximum benefit.

For earning one’s livelihood one should not lose from the yardstick of ethical principles; otherwise, one will be blameworthy for his earning. One of the most significance in Buddhism is that the Buddha used only livelihood (jīvita), which is very clear not for becoming rich driven by unwholesome motivation but with the purpose of supporting, families, and the Saṅgha.

**Saving**

Having discussed on earning, I shall turn the direction to saving or maintaining one’s own properties. What does saving refer to? Indeed, saving means maintaining one’s wealth in proper equivalent. One should not follow the extreme idea of not spending totally and over
luxurious without considering one’s earning. The Buddha clearly gave in Sigalovāda Sutta, how one should maintain the acquisition of wealth. “One portion for his wants he uses, two portions on his business spends the fourth for times of need he keeps.” (Ekena bhoge bhunjęyya dvīhi kammaṃ payojaye Catutthaṅca nidhāpeyya āpadāsu bhavissati"ti. DN.iii.153). One does not know how business will be either success, lost or neither. Therefore, for the future maintenance one should keep a portion in times of needs. Moreover, there is also guidance for maintaining wealth in Kulasutta. There are four reasons for the maintaining of family wealth for a long time, they are: (PTS AN.i. 572)

1. They look for things that are lost. (naṭṭham na gavesanti)
2. They repair things that have gotten old. (jiṇṇam na paṭisaṅkharoni)
3. They are moderate in consuming food and drink. (aparimitapānabhojanā honti)
4. They place a virtuous, principled woman or man in the position of authority. (dussīlaṃ itthim vā purisam vā ādhipacce ṭhapenti)

This day the affluent people do not care when they lost or repairing the old properties. Even the modern poor family also tries to imitate this habit showing their boastful nature as a rich. This is not simply for a matter of money but considering for the resources. All factors give exemplary lives of modern and sustainable lifestyle. The last factor is indeed very important for handling wealth for performing responsibility to the right person.

It is not only the above factors; the Buddha also promulgated rules for the monks. If robe is unsuitable for wearing, robe should use for bed-sheet; when it is not suitable for using bed-sheet monk should prepare for pillow cover. If pillow cover is also not suitable they should make mattress. In the last stage, even if mattress is also not fit to use, let the monk use as dust for repairing tent. Moreover, the monks are supposed to have only eight set of requisites namely, double robe, upper robe, lower robe, alms-bowl, razor, waistband, thread, and water strainer. To make the life easier for Buddhist monk, the Buddha laid down for the simplicity and commitment in his teaching. Furthermore, in Samaññaphalasutta (DN 2), the Buddha said that “a monk abstains from accepting gold and silver. He abstains from accepting uncooked grain, raw meat, women and girls, male and female slaves, goats and sheep, fowl and swine, elephants, cattle, horses and mares. He abstains from accepting fields and lands.” Possessing lots of properties is like a household life, therefore, the Buddha strongly discouraged for monk
and gave a simile to be content with basic requisites in *Samaññaphalasutta* (DN.2) “Just as a bird, wherever it goes, flies with its wings as its only burden; so too is he content with a set of robes to provide for his body and alms food to provide for his hunger. Wherever he goes, he takes only his barest necessities along. This is how a monk is content.” In Buddhism overall whether poor or rich to be content is very important which the Buddha says, ‘contentment is the greatest wealth’ (*santuṭṭhiparamāṃ dhanāṃ*. Dhp. 204).

Having made effort for earning one’s livelihood righteously, one should have contentment. There is no enough wealth for those who have no contentment. It does not matter whether lay people or monastic; there is no enough amounts of wealth, possession, and resources.

**Spending**

Spending usually depends on how much one earns from salary a person possesses. However, in these days, there is the other way that one can spend without even possessing or earning much money as a result much suffering follows in their lives. Due to current economics system, one can lend loan by showing one’s property. Indeed, spending more than the amount of a person’s earning is certainly led to misery in his social life and spiritual life eventually. The Buddha taught how one should spend one’s earning in the *Sīṅgalovāda Sutta*: “One portion for his wants he uses, two portions on his business spends the fourth for times of need he keeps.” (*Ekena bhoge bhuṭjeyya dvīhi kammaṃ payojaye catutthaṅca nidhāpeyya āpadāsu bhavissati"ti.*) If a person earns monthly for four thousand dollars; he should spend a thousand having invested two portions and keep for future the fourth part. Nowadays, many people live their lives by spending more than their earning. As a result not only their individual live is in danger but also their family and relatives.

In Buddhism, nothing happens without any reason. Similarly, in the modern society why people spend more than their earning? Due to modern technology and media, many sources of instigation lead to the people more greedy than a person needs. Indeed, it is not other than the devil religion of consumerism. According to this doctrine, the more one spends for
gratification of senses the best fulfillment it is. Seeking for the gratification of senses, one falls in the trap of consumerism; as a result one is in danger by himself and family. The Vyaggapajja Sutta gives four conditions for destruction of wealth: (i) Debauchery, (ii) drunkenness, (iii) gambling, and (iv) friendship, companionship and intimacy with evildoers. Due to these conditions one may possess big amount of wealth; but finally one is subject to destruction of all wealth.

Buddhism never discourages for spending earning in wisely for good purposes. Such good purposes always encourage in Buddhism such as supporting one’s parents, son and wife and relatives is blessing according to Maṅgala Sutta. If a person does not support parents, sons, wife, and relatives, there will be problem in the society. It is the respective duty that a person should support one’s parents, and family. In Siṅgalovāda Sutta, it gives the duties comprehensively for every individual in the society. If these duties do not run smoothly, problem will arise. In these days, sons are not maintaining the duties towards parents, sons and wife that eventually problem arises in the family and society.

One should spend one’s earning not only for supporting to one’s family but also for guest and helpless people. In most tradition, serving to the guest is common not just due to religious belief and compulsory but as a sign of harmony and altruism. Due to this kind of treatment one gets result in return. Therefore, for releasing one’s selfish desire and maintaining a harmonious society it is a good practice to serve the travellers, old people and helpless people.

In Saṃyutta Nikāya, it shows an example of water in both usefulness and uselessness. Like water in a haunted place that, without being imbibed, dries up: such is the wealth acquired by a worthless person who neither enjoys it himself nor gives. But one enlightened & knowing, on acquiring wealth, enjoys it & performs his duties. He, a bull among men, having supported his kin, without blame, he goes to the land of heaven.(Amanussaṭṭhāne udakam va sītam tadapeyyamānaṃ parisosameti, Evaṃ dhanam kāpuriso labhitvā nevattanā bhuñjati no dadāti. Dhīro ca viñṇā adhigamma bhoge yo bhuñjati kiccakaro ca hoti, So ṇātisaṅgham nisabho bharitvā anindito saggamupeti ṭhānanti.) (PTS SN.i. 92)

The last important advice is that one should try to spend minimum earning with maximisation of benefit. This is very thoughtful ideas both for individual and for others. For instance, by
spending least amount and serving many benefit. Off course, it does not mean with cheap commodity and serving many, which will be less value due to the standard of the things. This is important in this era for business people and investors in order to prevent from exploitation of nature and its resources. In this world, resources are limited but the want of people are limitless. If people wants are limited, then at that time it could be balanced with the limited resources in the world. Due to limitless wants of the people, suffering becomes more. If this rather wants increase, gradually the world will be empty like dessert and no useful at all for the survival of living beings. Therefore, for the happiness of oneself and other one should try to minimise of using the resources with the maximisation of greater well-beings.

**Economics and poverty**

More or less poverty is something to do with economics. Due to irregularities of the economics flow, poverty is shown in the society. It could be different interpretation of poor or poverty. The general understanding of poverty is having no monetary possession in terms of wealth, property or cash. Under such less monetary value, it is said in Asia most of the people spend their lives with less than a Dollar in a day. This case is strongly believed as poverty by the current globalization trend. The general concept of poverty is having less possession. What is the definition of poverty in Buddhist vocabulary? In Buddhism, possessing less amount of wealth or property does not strictly regard as poverty. Poverty is if a person is lack of maintaining the basic sustenance of life such as food, cloth, medicine and shelter. Despite of lacking these necessities, one can still live a happy and peaceful life. Therefore, Buddhism could be two possibilities of poor namely poverty for requirements and poverty for wants. In Buddhism, poverty for requirement is considered as poverty or poor. Poverty is curse for the society; it is to be solved as an urgent problem. Due to poverty, the disorder of social problem arises as noted in Cakkavatti Sīhanāda Sutta (Dīgha Nikāya, Sutta: 26) and other discourses. Poverty is responsible by the government to provide the subjects. Due to negligent of responsibility by the government, lots of problem in the society could be seen. However, the other kind is important in Buddhist context. It is an unethical kind of want. The second kind of poverty is not concerned in Buddhism. Indeed, there are many reasons for the poverty of
maintaining one’s necessities such as lack of government responsibilities or personal endeavours of working. Economics is the solution of poverty, hence, government are responsible to look after its subjects. It is far better keeping in mind without thinking with burden head “contentment is the highest wealth”. Then, only a person will able to smile despite of being poverty. Besides that, one can learn how to earn earning with sustainably without disturbing nature and its environment.

**Is wealth the final goal of human beings**

The current economics trend believes that economics is the final solution and all in all. It is no more second God replacement of first creator “God” through which one can get as one wishes. Therefore, they claim money is the source of everything and happiness too unexceptionally. Indeed, all these ideas are materialists’ believers. Now is the only moment where one can enjoy as much as one desire. Who knows how will be next life? If no more in the next existence, then what is the usage of this present life? Then, use present live as much as one wish through the enjoyment of sensual pleasure. These kinds of ideas do not agree with Buddhist aim of wealth. Wealth is not the ultimate goal of human beings. It is just a means of doing something. In Sabbāsava Sutta (Majjhima Nikāya- Sutta: 2), the proper usage of four requisites:

Reflection of clothe is only for protection from cold, heat, gadflies, mosquitoes, wind, heat of the sun, snakes, scorpions and lice, and just to cover up his nakedness.

Reflection of food as not for enjoyment, not for vanity, not for improvement of the body, not for a better complexion, but only to sustain the physical body, to have just enough nourishment for maintaining life, to appease hunger and to carry out the Noble Practice of Purity. ‘By this food, I shall remove the existing hunger and shall prevent the arising of new craving for desire. I shall have just enough nourishment to maintain life and to lead a blameless life with good health.’

Reflection of shelter is to make use only for protection from cold, heat, gadflies, mosquitoes, wind, heat of the sun, snakes, scorpions and lice, and inclement weather, and for the purpose of solitary seclusion.

Reflection of medicine is to make use of medicinal requisites for curing illness. He uses them only to remove oppressive ailments that arise and only to be completely free from further ailment.
These four reflections bring the main Buddhist purpose of using resources, which is simply as a means. It is not the place to stop for further after acquiring abundance wealth and to enjoy it. If a person has this kind of understanding, nobody will engage in war for the sake of earning wealth, livelihood and maintenance of life. From the beginning of one’s life, it is surviving due to the support of nutriments. Without nutriments, the body cannot sustain. Therefore, whether it is food, cloth, medicine or shelter all are for the provision of life and while searching for the spiritual development. If human life is ultimate with wealth and enjoyment, then, they are no more difference from animals that simply use of food, shelter and enjoyment of sensual pleasure without spiritual concern.

It is not simply due to afraid of being an animal that one should practice dharma, but there is the possible to develop the mind into highest stage. For attaining higher state, one has to keep aside from the sphere of sensual pleasure. Even the bliss of absorption (jhāna) is not the highest that a human can attain. It is possible by transcending both sensual pleasure and absorption bliss one can attain highest bliss. That highest bliss is incomparable with low and vulgar enjoyment of beings in the world. However, it should not think the higher goal of Buddhism is something to be experienced as feeling through the enjoyment of five sensual pleasures. Indeed, it is with the suspension of all these worldly enjoyment and merriment, a person can realise this highest bliss. In Rāja Sutta of Muccalindavagga, Udāna, bliss of Nibbāna is compare with other lowly pleasure. “Whatever bliss is the world is found in sensual pleasures and whatever there is of heavenly bliss, these are not worth a sixteenth part of the bliss of craving’s destruction.” (John: 24). Therefore, it is clear in Buddhism with the earning of one’s livelihood and enjoyment is not to be contented. Wealth or properties are simply means of pursuing highest happiness.

Buddhism believes not only the present life but also the future existence until one does not able to eradicate defilements. In such situation, for earning livelihood one has to earn some provision for happiness in this long run of existence both in this life and future existence. Dighajantu Sutta (Aṅguttara Nikāya. iv. 280) provides the condition for present happiness and future happiness for a householder. The sources of present happiness represent energy, maintenance of wealth, noble friend and balance life as the source of happiness. On the other hand, the condition for future happiness represents of confidence, morality, generosity and
wisdom. Wealth is nothing but an opportunity to create either good condition or bad condition. Therefore, one should try to apply these eight conditions for present and future happiness.

Conclusion

Generally, economics is measured with possession of wealth and properties of the people. However, in the Buddhist context, it is not enough to measure economics as its sole aim for making lots of money. Simply it is a means for developing the highest spirituality that man has the capacity to develop it. It is universal concerned along middle way not just human beings but its environment and surrounding for earning money. Buddhist economics has the criteria of right livelihood (sammañña). Otherwise, without that it will no longer regard as Buddhist economics.

Sources


Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 3: Buddha or Karl Marx.