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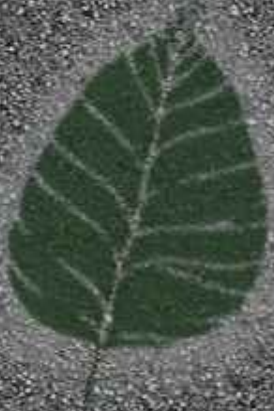
Why the Buddha Did Not Preach to a Hungry Man

Buddhist Reflections on Affluence and Poverty

Louis van Loon



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Introduction

This essay is intended to explore from a Buddhist point of view the issue of affluence and poverty. At the outset it is necessary to point out that a Buddhist thinker would of necessity approach this issue from a different perspective than that which forms the basis of much Western thinking on the subject. In accordance with its philosophical outlook that all empirical phenomena are interdependently connected and causally related, Buddhism assigns no absolute value to any of them. There are thus no definite "objects" or "entities" in the Buddha's philosophy. Rather, the world is viewed as a dynamic pattern of events which appears as a collection of static "articles" and "things" only from the standpoint of an unenlightened observer. In the Buddhist view, a mountain is as much a "happening" as is the flame of

a burning candle. It is just that our minds are conditioned to look upon the more slowly moving patterns of change as inert "objects."

This tendency—to assign a concrete and absolute status to situations that are essentially points of reference in a dynamic field of relationship—is at the core of our philosophical ignorance: we insist on confining to the particular that which is universal; we dichotomize things into good and evil whereas there is only a balancing continuum of positive and negative energies, actions and reactions, causes and effects. Similarly, from a Buddhist perspective affluence and poverty would be seen not as absolutes opposed to ("versus") each other, but as relative values in a complex and fluid psychic continuum of perceived needs and wants. Though we divide lifestyles into "affluent" and "destitute," in this area of human experience we are really dealing principally with a spectrum of psychological attitudes to needs and wants. Affluence and poverty have to do with feelings of fulfilment and well-being rather than with an equation of goods and people.

Arrowheads from IBM Casings

In every society, simple or sophisticated, there are levels of subsistence below which people's lives are rendered virtually meaningless and inconsequential because their dominant experiences in life consist only of hunger, illness and unrelieved misery. We know only too well that such forms of "absolute" poverty exist in backward rural villages as well as in the slums and ghettos of New York and Johannesburg. Similarly, there are levels of "absolute" affluence in the world which enable a few people to live far beyond their real needs and reasonable wants. This level too may be found amongst the privileged members of primitive societies as much as it can be seen along Sunset Boulevard.

However, what makes one man poor and another rich is not only a question of material possessions, how much they consume or the extent to which they are able to satisfy their cravings. This is determined largely by the manner in which they subjectively experience and psychologically evaluate a feeling of well-being in the context of the environment in which they happen to be situated. Indeed, "poverty" and "affluence" are largely relative terms: quantitatively, a well-to-do member of a primitive Bushman society is still desperately poor compared with an urbanised African who may well own a radio, a guitar, a good suit and some cattle at his homeland kraal. He,

however, is appallingly destitute when his lifestyle is contrasted with that of a white artisan who, in turn, envies the earning capacity—and everything that goes with it—of a Johannesburg business executive who, however, may well earn— and be able to afford only as much as a New York dockworker.

Between the "poor" bushman and the "affluent" Rockefellers there exists, indeed, an enormous quantitative difference in measurable, material wealth. But what is surely also important is to assess how each, in the compass of his particular socio-economic situation, qualitatively experiences this poverty/affluence level as a measure of intrinsic well-being. The acquisition of a set of new bronze arrowheads, for instance, may well be as much of a thrill to the primitive hunter as is the purchase of the latest IBM computer to the millionaire business tycoon. The computer, however, is a perfectly useless piece of equipment to the Bushman (who would probably wish to make arrowheads out of its casing) whereas the arrows may, at most, find a place in Rockefeller's Primitive Art collection. The two lifestyles are really nowhere in contact with each other. Their concepts of what constitutes wealth and affluence therefore bypass each other; each is irrelevant to the other.

In short, affluence and poverty are variables which

may assume “absolute” values at various points on a sliding scale of socio-economic conditions which differ from society to society and which are relative to their adopted or accustomed lifestyles.

Snowmobiles to Tropical Countries

We tend to judge “unsophisticated” cultures from the point of view of our gadget-cluttered society. Because we are so preoccupied with “getting things out of life” (whatever that may mean) through a colossal expenditure of effort and use of natural resources, we pity any other society that does not have the benefit of our capacity to exploit and maim our natural environment and burden our lives with masses of silly contrivances and diversions.

Certainly, if these are the criteria by which one wishes to assess levels of affluence and well-being then, indeed, simple modes of existence are poverty-stricken. We demonstrate this view in our aid programmes to the nations we have designated as being “poor”: Western nations are known to have donated sophisticated textile machinery to countries that have neither the executive or technical skills nor

the raw materials to operate them; they have sent snow mobiles to tropical countries and fishing vessels to land-locked nations.

It is obvious that such an attitude to poverty and affluence is based on the wrong premises. The technologically advanced nations have taken it upon themselves to force their interpretation of well-being onto the "underdeveloped" communities, labelling them poor simply because they do not conform to their idea of an infinite-growth, consumer-oriented society. This has a self-fulfilling effect: increasingly, only the industrialised nations can afford to produce the goods needed to maintain their ever-expanding lifestyles, leaving the "poor" nations ever further behind in an acquisitive, hedonic race to consume the world's dwindling natural resources.

This race now embroils the entire globe to the extent that originally self-sufficient economies, by being so treated as poor are now, in fact, becoming truly destitute by not being able to afford even the most basic necessities of life. They are being drawn into a global scale of economic standards that is not of their making and find themselves automatically assigned to the lowest rungs. What used to be a local and relative form of well-being has been converted into a state of "absolute" poverty by having been forced to adopt an inflated socio-economic frame of reference that has

been invented by, and is only applicable to, highly industrialised nations.

Even the boons of modern technology have a tendency to work against these "underdeveloped" nations. The reduction in their child mortality rate, for instance—however laudable in itself— curses them with an explosion in their population that runs well ahead of their capacity to feed the very same children saved by the miracle of twentieth-century preventive medicine, turning them, indeed, into walking skeletons. But high reproductive rates continue because that is how archaic societies, to a large extent, measure their sense of well-being. In too many cases the technological successes of the affluent nations have spelled nothing but disaster when transplanted into societies that had never felt the need nor the desire to be so materially ambitious in the first place. It is the penalty of having grafted the standard of well-being of one lifestyle onto that of another.

The Hedonic Principle

The experience of well-being, of meaningfulness and a sense of fulfilment, cannot be measured in dollar bills or handfuls of rice only. The sense of well-being is

subjective. It reflects the extent to which an individual is able to express his or her creativity, the human potential. And that, again, is relative to the particular environment and the framework of socio-economic norms and values with which that individual happens to be integrated.

We cannot be sure that a simple, non-technological culture devoid of internal combustion engines and plastic milk bottles, however poor it may appear to be according to our standards, is spiritually, materially, psychologically less fulfilling than life in Hillbrow. We cannot compare experiences we have with ones we have never had, as little as we would crave for caviar if we had never tasted it.

Therefore, are we not unwise in pitying that poor Bushman because his desert lacks urban sprawl and freeways? Shouldn't we, instead, be envious of his atonement with his natural environment—something we try to re-enact so pathetically in our motorised safaris and gas-fired braais? How shall we ever know whether tribal dancers enjoy themselves more—or less—than our teenagers in their discotheques? Does the absence of tax-free savings accounts in his economic system really worry the Bushman?

It is an inborn human failing, however, dating back to man's earliest hominid days, that once we are

presented with an opportunity to expand our sensual horizons we will unhesitatingly do so. It happened with the invention of the wheel; it happened again with the electric toothbrush. From stone axes to private jet planes, they are all part of an acquisitive syndrome that is basic to human nature; they define a hedonic principle that is the driving force behind man's psycho-social development; it is the golden—or perhaps the leaden?—thread that runs through our evolution and the pages of our history books.

This hedonic principle (the Buddhists call it *taṇhā* or "craving") is behind the experience of disappointment, dissatisfaction and frustration that is so fundamental to human existence. It drives us on and on in the pursuit of an impossible dream: the acquisition of a state of happiness in which all our desires are satisfied, in which there are no more needs and where our wants are painlessly realised. As this is impossible to attain, *taṇhā* inevitably gives rise to *dukkha*, "suffering."

Buddhism may well be defined as a religion that shows us not only how to come to grips with craving and suffering, but also how we may transcend them. This, the Buddha taught, can come about only when we have learned how to direct our mind, our awareness, away from its tendency to become emotionally entangled and attached to the objects

contacted by our senses and towards a way of viewing things in their causal connectedness as they arise and fall away, with equanimity, insight and compassion. The world is then no longer perceived merely as a collection of objects and conditions from which one is forever attempting to extract the desirable entities and avoid the undesirable ones, but as a continuum of causal events, neither good nor bad by themselves, and arousing therefore neither greed, envy, aversion or attachment in us.

Only such a state of mind conduces to true happiness because it is not dependent on circumstances being this way or that. One is content because things are what they are—not because they happen to conform to one's specification for happiness. For the enlightened saint, every situation is essentially OK and workable. There is no judgement or regret or glee, blame or praise, just the joy of being clearly aware of "what is," the "suchness" of things, and the joy of interacting with things with understanding and compassion.

Being poor or affluent is a judgement based on comparisons. Like hot or cold and long or short, poverty and affluence are mental constructs, useful to demarcate the boundaries of a particular situation. They are relative to each other. Just as hot and cold describe a temperature range, so do affluence and

poverty describe a range of needs and wants, or rather: attitudes to needs and wants. Depending on where one finds oneself within that range one feels oneself to be hot or cold—or poor or affluent. It depends on which way one is looking, which end of the scale one is comparing oneself with. But if one did not indulge in such judgements and comparisons, one would simply experience oneself the way one found oneself. This, by and large, is how the Buddha encouraged laypersons to train themselves: to be realistically in the here and now and make every circumstance ethically workable.

But there is yet another way of being neither poor nor affluent. If one lowers one's demands on the world, reduces one's needs to the merely necessary, and has no desire to have more than that (i.e. if one eliminates one's wants), then a scale of affluence and poverty would no longer affect one either. One would have opted out altogether. This, of course, applies to the lifestyle of the monk or nun.

The "Best Life"

A Buddhist monk who has renounced all worldly possessions and who devotes all his time to dissolving

his sense of self and its many wants experiences, as a result, a degree of fulfilment, meaning and purpose in life that is in sharp contrast with that of the successful, popular, wealthy Hollywood star who contemplates—and often commits—suicide because life, to him or her, has become an unbearable ordeal: the ego and its wants has become a rampant, insatiable, all-consuming monster.

Quantitative affluence does not necessarily guarantee the experience of well-being. Wealth and status bring with them strife and competition, envy and ill will, and-yes—insecurity and anxiety. The feeling of living a meaningful life is subjective, psychological. It has to do with a spiritual dimension in man, a religious depth, rather than bank balances and yachts. Indeed, we may have to make up our minds which is the more important goal in our life: anxiety-ridden existence draped in glitter, or sack-cloth, tranquillity, contentment and purposefulness.

This does not mean, however, that only sack-cloth can produce peace of mind and that any form of wealth automatically leads to unhappiness. Buddhism teaches that it is not the lack or abundance of possessions as such that gives us the experience of poverty or affluence, only the extent to which we are attached to things and crave for them, whether they are needs or wants. It is not "bad" to appreciate

enjoyable things; but one should refrain from craving for and clinging to them. Money, yachts and arrowheads are neutral entities by themselves; they only become "possessions" when the concepts of self and ownership enter our heads and with them, attachment, envy, and greed.

The Buddha's teachings were aimed primarily at the psychological upliftment and spiritual emancipation of man. But he knew, of course, that such upliftment is impossible in an environment that is so impoverished that all one's energies need to be channelled into mere physical survival. So he often indicated how his teachings could be applied to matters of state, economics and social welfare.

There were, he said, four "conditions" conducive to happiness for the layperson, so that the "best life" could be lived. The first was to become a useful, integrated member of society: to become "skilled and efficient, earnest and energetic" in a profession, craft or trade. The second was the opportunity to "safeguard" one's income and wealth, righteously earned, "by the sweat of one's brow," i.e. not to have it overtaxed, confiscated or in other ways eroded, devalued or "stolen." The third: to associate with intelligent, trustworthy, generous and virtuous friends. Fourth: a balanced lifestyle, where one spends and saves wisely, in proportion with one's income, i.e.

one is neither a miser nor a spendthrift. In this respect, the Buddha once advised a young man to apportion his income in such a way that one quarter was spent on his daily expenses, one half used to run his business, and the remainder set aside for emergencies.

The "joys" that result from such prudent conduct are, he said, again of four kinds. The first three concern one s material well-being: the joy of being able to acquire, by just means and personal effort and skill, sufficient wealth to provide for one's economic security; the joy of spending this wealth liberally but wisely on meritorious deeds and on oneself, one's family, friends and relatives; and the joy of being without debts and able to meet one's liabilities. The fourth joy, the most important, is spiritual in nature: the joy of being able to live a blameless, virtuous life, free of evil in thought, word and deed.

Obviously, the first three joys make the fourth one possible. But the Buddha claimed the joys of material prosperity to be "not worth one sixteenth part" of the bliss that comes from a religiously meaningful life. This is so, of course, because a life lived free of evil in thought, word and deed dismantles the unwholesome kammic conditions that cause repeated rebirths and therefore liberates one from saṃsāra, the round of perpetual becoming. The way to Nibbāna is paved with virtue.

Yet it is clear that economic well-being is a necessary condition for the spiritual welfare of any society. Even monks and nuns— although their "best life" is measured entirely in spiritual terms— are utterly dependent on a reasonably affluent lay community to provide them with food, shelter and robes. The Buddha, therefore, placed the utmost stress on material welfare-not for its own sake, so that people would be happy simply because their bellies were filled—but as a condition that made truly enlightened, meaningful living possible.

Banyan Trees and Mango Groves.

This principle is well expressed in one of the rock edicts of the great Buddhist king, Asoka (250 BC). In reviewing his "Rule of Righteousness" eighteen years after his conversion to Buddhism, he says that his principal aim has been to instruct his subjects in Buddhist "righteousness" so that they could enjoy the best life:

"I have had banyan trees planted along the roads to give shade to man and beast. I have planted mango groves, and I have had ponds dug and shelters erected

along the roads at every eight kos. Everywhere, I have had wells dug for the benefit of man and beast. But this benefit is but small, for in many ways the kings of olden times also worked for the welfare of the world. But what I have done has been done so that men may conform to righteousness."

He goes on to relate how, as a consequence of his actions, virtue has increased in his kingdom: how there is obedience to parents and teachers; respect and care for the aged; kindliness to the monks and ascetics, to the poor and the weak, to slaves and servants.

Asoka clearly followed the Buddha's suggestions as to what he considered the duties of a king or a government to be. These were, first and foremost, the prevention of poverty. Poverty, the Buddha maintained, leads to a miserable, debilitated state of mind. The mind becomes clouded with worry and insecurity. Hatred and jealousy arise and theft and violence and deception follow. People need to go to great lengths to protect what they have, be that little or much, and learn to be callous and miserly and greedy. Thus, poverty causes immorality and crime. The "best life" has become impossible.

Therefore, a ruler's priority is to organise society in such a way that employment, food production and industry are generated: seeds and fodder should be

made available to the farmers; capital to industries (in the Buddha's day, in 500 BC, the mining, metal working and textile industries were often parastatal institutions), and so on. This, the Buddha claimed, was the way to combat crime and immorality, not by repression and punishment.

The Greek traveller Megosthenes, writing in about 300 BC (before Asoka and thence before Buddhism had become an important element in Indian society) commented on the unusually harsh judgements that were meted out in Brahmanical India at the time. Petty criminals were often arbitrarily executed or severely maimed. Every aspect of public and private affairs was burdened by complex legislation and laws that required an enormous—and often corrupt—bureaucracy to administer. But 700 years later, after Buddhist moral principles had established themselves throughout the length and breadth of India, Chinese travellers wrote about the people of India as a nation that "… practises the teachings of the compassionate Buddha. It has become a habit with them not to kill and not to fight." These travellers marvelled that the death penalty had been abolished, that only the lower castes ate meat and that the people enjoyed an exceptional freedom of speech and movement. Indian society, it seems, enjoyed the best life that was possible at the time under the circumstances.

On a smaller scale, in areas that had come under the Buddha's influence, such enlightened ways of living had already become possible in his own time. The Vajji Republic, for instance, had adopted "seven principles leading to prosperity," suggested to them by the Buddha. There was "frequent assembly" amongst the Vajji elders and leaders of the community. Unanimity was aimed for in any decisions that affected the welfare of the people. Such decisions were carried out "as authorised and, as much as was possible, in keeping with established religious and social custom." The elders in the community were revered and asked for advice based on their more mature experience. Women and minors were protected from being exploited and abused. Due reverence was given to religious institutions and tithes encouraged to support them. The "worthy ones" (the sages, monks and nuns) were made to feel welcome wherever they went. It is to be noted that the Buddha's own monastic order was guided by these same democratic principles redefined, where necessary, to suit the ascetic lifestyle of the monks and nuns.

It is clear that the Buddha felt that the welfare of a community is to be measured essentially in psychological terms: in a sense of community; in friendship and virtue; in a caring and responsible

attitude to religious institutions, the elderly, the renunciates, women and children. Such a community would, as a consequence, enjoy material welfare: "increase in well-being can be expected in such a society, not decline."

Small is Beautiful

In one of the most significant books ever written on the subject of economics (E.F. Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered*) the underlying theme is Buddhistic. Schumacher, a devout Christian himself, points out that a Buddhist would wish to plan his socio-economic environment in such a way that an optimum of well-being is obtained with a minimum of consumption, contrary to the prevailing Western view which suggests that the greater the amount of consumption the better off we ought to be.

The Buddhist outlook flows naturally from a concern to do the least possible harm to the environment and to interfere only as much as is necessary in the lifestyle of one's fellow creatures—plant, animal or human. The mindless squandering of irreplaceable natural resources and the devastation of

our lived environment would, in a Buddhist-inspired economy, be considered as incredible follies; as acts of violence against one's natural habitat, equivalent to cutting one's wrist. Human labour would not be considered as a mere cost item, to be reduced to drudgery if profit or productivity so demand it, or to be eliminated altogether if possible through automation, but as the most immediate, natural and effective means through which a human being can express his or her humanity and usefulness the fact that he or she matters.

Equally important, a Buddhist economy would be highly adaptable and globally diversified to match, as much as possible, regional needs to local resources. This would avoid the frightful international power play which is, by and large, a contest between competing economic ideologies, locked in a deadly clash to acquire what are considered to be the world's sources of well-being: raw materials, cheap labour, agricultural land, industrial capacity, consumer markets, etc. In the process they inflict their conception of well-being onto a host of unwilling nations who are becoming increasingly powerless to resist this onslaught on their traditional lifestyles.

Such a Buddhist economic attitude may well mean that certain areas of the world will retain their man-drawn rickshaw carts as a means of mass transport

whereas other regions have computer-run monorail hover-trains. But we should stop labelling the one poor and the other affluent, because a rickshaw may well have the same relative, economic utility value in that part of the world as the hover-train has in the other. Similarly, a mono diet of rice and dhal—provided enough of it is available—is not necessarily a sign of a low standard of living, one that should at all cost be replaced by a lifestyle in which steak and kidney pies are consumed.

Economics with a Human Face

In the Buddhist view, true civilization is exemplified when society functions in such a way that each man and woman has the optimum opportunity to ennoble his or her character and to live in harmony and peace with their fellows and their environment, whether that happens to be the Kalahari Desert or Fifth Avenue.

I have already indicated in what way the Buddha thought society—and an individual's attitude—could be shaped so as to make the "best life" possible. But there are many other elements in his teachings that show how each individual may go about structuring his or her actions and attitudes, so that practical

conditions of well-being are created. One of the steps on the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path, for instance, deals with "Right Livelihood." It is one of eight factors which, together, constitute the overall training of a Buddhist. This training covers the entire spectrum of our psychophysical constitution and aims at nothing less than the perfection of our virtue, gaining control over the workings of our mind and emotions, and developing a transcendental insight that is capable of perceiving the true nature of things behind their superficial appearance.

Right Livelihood isolates those trades and occupations that should be avoided if we are to demonstrate our wisdom and morality in the manner in which we acquire our daily bread and without which all other religious zeal would be spurious. It condemns specifically any activity that helps to keep people in bondage, demeaning servitude or drudgery; it considers it unworthy to be in any way involved in the manufacture of or trade in weapons and intoxicating or mind-deranging drinks and drugs or any other substances that can pollute or cripple our environment or harm our fellow creatures; it is consistent in its all-encompassing attitude of compassion and harmlessness in disapproving of the trade in animals for slaughter and food.

Another example of this type of simple but highly

effective attitude to human welfare is the Buddha's suggestion that each man and woman should be in the habit of planting a tree every five years. Imagine the benefits that would result if such a policy was encouraged worldwide—especially if, at the same time, our agricultural policies were given a vegetarian orientation, another Buddhist predilection (vegetarian agricultural policies have been proven to yield ten times as much food value for the same use of land, capital and labour resources as agricultural methods that emphasise the production of animal protein). There is virtually no capital cost involved for even a child to obtain and plant a seed or seedling once every five years. No foreign exchange or development aid is required, no fancy equipment or expert advice, yet the countryside could be made to yield abundant fruit, nuts and other foodstuffs, building material and fibre, provide shade and conserve water, upgrade the capacity of the soil to carry crops, etc., all within a single generation.

These are just two examples out of many that can be found in the Buddha's teachings that show that an economic strategy based on Buddhist principles would have a human face. It may not have the neon-lit heroics of twentieth-century technology, but then it would not have its horrendous dehumanising effects either.

Golf Tournaments or Monasteries

In every Buddhist country, in ancient as well as modern times, there has always been enough surplus wealth—however poor the Western world may have labelled them—to make it possible for large numbers of men and women to live lives of religious dedication as monks and nuns. Buddhist monks and nuns (the Sangha) have no wants and their needs are so elementary that the lay community finds it no strain to provide them with a simple meal once a day and, occasionally, with a set of robes. Here, poverty has attained an elevated status because it implies that the "beggar" has become quite indifferent to his economic position and the beguiling attractions of worldly things, attractions which still entrap the (relatively) affluent layperson who, by the very act of almsgiving, silently and humbly acknowledges this fact.

The surplus wealth spent on the Sangha in Buddhist countries has existed in almost every civilization. The Egyptians spent it on pyramids; the Western world lavishes it on cosmetics, tobacco and alcohol, on missiles and an occasional war, on soap operas and golf tournaments, and on handouts to the poor nations. Yet some indulgence in contemplative

religion would cost our community very little compared with what we are now prepared to spend on such hobbies as space research and high-energy particle physics.

Not only does the maintenance of a Sangha make it possible for many people who feel the need to withdraw from secular life to do so (a need which, when frustrated, produces dropouts and drug communes in our affluent society—a society that does not easily countenance even genuine contemplatives), it also removes from society those surplus members who may have joined the ranks of the unemployed and doledrawers. More significantly, perhaps, monks and nuns do not contribute to population explosions, apart from the fact that Buddhist countries have in any case no particular bias in favour of large families nor are they against the practise of birth-control. It is the quality of life that is important, not just the quantity.

Also, instead of having their senior citizens ignobly carried by state-run welfare programmes and assigned to penury and irrelevancy in chilly old-age homes, many of the aged in Buddhist communities retire only too willingly as contemplative monks and nuns to complete their lives meaningfully in the peaceful surroundings of monastic settlements and meditation centres. In fact, a Buddhist community can be deemed to have failed if it did not spontaneously produce, and

support, a significant number of such "poor" contemplatives in their midst.

Conclusion

Although Schumacher has convincingly indicated how many of the world's economic ills may be eliminated or alleviated by the application of Buddhistic principles to such schemes as the establishment of small, rural agro-industrial units in impoverished regions; the use of a labour intensive "intermediate" technology; gifts of training and knowledge rather than handouts of money and fancy equipment, etc.; and although this paper has highlighted some additional human factors and religious attitudes that would play a part in a Buddhist-inspired economic system, it must be accepted that the success of such a globally applied Buddhist economic strategy would largely depend on vast numbers of people acquiring a Buddhist mentality. As this is highly unlikely (existing Buddhist communities cannot even apply these principles consistently) there is no doubt that "we shall have the poor with us always" (Matthew 26, verse 11).

The principal aim of this Buddhist contribution to

the discussion on affluence and poverty has been to indicate that it would be a folly to treat these socio-economic situations simply as problems of "distributing wealth," "transferring technology to the poor," "educating the affluent to enjoy their leisure," etc. The real issues are far more complex and subjective and concern people rather than goods, the psyche of man more than his stomach.

However, as Schumacher has pointed out, even if we only physically handled these problems along Buddhist principles, the well-being of man could change dramatically within as little as a decade, leading, without a doubt, to a parallel improvement in man's morality, humanity and wisdom. After all, even the Buddha once refused to preach to a starving man until his hunger had first been appeased.

About The Author

Louis van Loon is a founding director of the Buddhist Retreat Centre in Ixopo, South Africa, where he regularly conducts courses and retreats. By profession a consulting engineer, he also lectures on Buddhism at the University of Durham and has participated in numerous conferences dealing with religious

perspectives on contemporary ethical problems. The present essay was originally written as a Buddhist contribution to a study programme entitled "Affluence and Poverty and the Word of God," organised by the Missiological Institute at the Lutheran Theological College in Mapumulo, Natal, South Africa.

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