

Buddhism for Economic Recovery: Potentials and Opportunities

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Introduction: Buddhism and its relevance for current issues

In this paper, I am planning to examine the relevance of Buddhist teachings, more its relevance as a socio-cultural agency in understanding situation Sri Lanka is passing and how to get out of it. Of course, it is the task of the state, economists and entrepreneurs etc., who are professional in dealing with economic matters to address the topic of economic empowerment. However, religion too, has not been a silent agent in critical situations. The faith leaders inspired by self-less thinking and love for their followers have taken leadership to guide people from their difficulties (the Buddha is symbolized as a ferry-man who leads people from fearful this shore to the other shore, which is safe (tinno'ahm tārāyissāmi) ; Moses led people to Canaan in the Old Bible).

Current Situation in Sri Lanka and world

According to the latest report of the world Bank, despite certain stabilities gained by the country within the last two years towards gaining economic progress, poverty of the general public has increased. A considerable number of both urban and rural areas have no access to work.¹

At the international level, it has been forecast, ten percent of the world population will have to be in poverty and this phenomenon would be a threatening cause to the achievements of the human civilization, peace, technology etc. The world may experience backslides to civil wars and violence as consequence of poverty. (To end global poverty, invest in peace: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/to-end-global-poverty-invest-in-peace/> googled 2024/05/07 at 10:22AM).

Previous Studies

Among the writings produced on the topic ‘ how Buddhism can support the course of alleviating poverty?’, I got interested in a few studies, one is P.D.Premasiri’s research paper titled “Religious Values and the Measurement of Poverty: A Buddhist Perspective” (1999) and the other , David Loy’s

¹ Sri Lanka's Economy Shows Signs of Stabilization, but Poverty to Remain Elevated: [HTTPS://WWW.WORLDBANK.ORG/EN/NEWS/PRESS-RELEASE/2024/04/01](https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2024/04/01); Googled: 5/5/2024 AT 4.29 AM

work “Buddhism and Poverty”² for the reason that both of them point out that Buddhism is not to increase the countless wants as the solution to poverty but contentment (santutthi) and spiritual values to be kept in the process of economic development.³ Another study produced by Ven. W. Wimalaratana also has re-emphasized the Buddhist textual teaching which would be helpful in providing an ethical framework in economic activity for the people.⁴

Religion and Development

Due to the modernization discourse, religion was perceived as a barrier to economic progress. However, since 2000s, the perception regarding the role of religion in the development discussion has taken a different direction. As Heynes Points out:

‘Anti-capitalist’, ‘anti-debt’ and ‘anti-consumerist’ movements and ideas collectively inform many different religious traditions at the present time, with notions of justice and equality often central as a source of ideas for philosophising about how to achieve development goals in the developing world. (Jeff Haynes, (2015), *Religion and Development*, 59)

We can see here the role of religion in development is considered as much positive. Further, faith based organizations have globally raised voice in matters related to development and related aspects. For instance, Christian organizations requested to cut off International Debts from developing countries and even total cancellation.

To see today’s perspective of religion’s positive role in developmental process, let us turn to some recent studies:

- I. In short, as already noted, there is growing recognition of religion’s potential in achieving better development outcomes. As we shall note briefly below, before examining in following chapters at greater length in relation to achievement of the MDGs, many perhaps most – development scholars and practitioners would now accept the need to see religion as an important dimension of development. (Jeff Haynes, (2015), *Religion and Development*, p. 60)
- II. It is now suggested to seek for a round -shaped development (material + spiritual). It is to be gained by the collaboration of secular agents and religious agencies. As Tyndale points out:
A starting point to achieve this goal would require that (secular) development agencies and local faith groups and communities work together, learning first to cooperate in reflecting on poverty, growth and development and, second, to construct new coalitions in development. The goal is to get the best from both worlds: ‘functional

² <https://buddhism.lib.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JR-MISC/101785.htm#:~:text=Such%20Buddhist%20teachings%20imply%20that,importance%20of%20the%20first%20ye>

³ Premasiri 1999: 7: The quality of life of a community that possesses not even a fraction of the goods possessed by a so-called affluent community may be far superior to that of the latter. For the abundance of material goods does not necessarily correspond to an abundance of human happiness.

⁴ Wimalaratana, W., 2003

rationality on the one hand and religion and spirituality on the other ... interrelated to get a concept of integrated (value based) development' (Tyndale 2004: 6 in Jeff Haynes, (2015), *Religion and Development*, p. 60).

Is Buddhism other-worldly and or world-denying?

The attempts to see religions in general as out of sphere of human activity due to the advancement of science (God is dead) and religion is a divisive force and even the possible cause of third world-war (Samuel Huntington on Islam) are no more valid theories today. Instead, the world has started to perceive the role of religion as far more effective a force in producing a positive effect in many areas of human dealings like peace-building. To turn to Buddhism, specially, Theravada Buddhism was labelled by Weber as other-worldly. Or some have tried to see Buddhism even as pessimistic.

Buddhist understanding of poverty and violence

What is poverty can be defined in both very technical ways and ordinary ways. From the Buddhist perspective, lacking four requisites, clothing, food, dwelling and medicine can be considered as poverty. To sustain the life, these are necessary. From the modern perspective, well-being may consist of many elements, wealth, relations, education, profession etc. If we confine to the fundamental level, lacking food and other necessities, then, we can observe that today's so sophisticated human civilization has not achieved freedom from poverty. What is alarming for the world is that forecasts made based on current statistics of under-privileged population in the world. According to them, worldwide violence will increase by 2030 due to poverty. The basic assumption that poverty leads to violence is a truth across time.

As to the Buddhist tradition, the popular discourse '*Cakkavattisihanāda Sutta*' (discourse of Universal Monarch) which portrays the 'Ideal Ruler' in Buddhist tradition, produces the following causal explanation:

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 increase in the taking of life, people's life-span decreased, their beauty decreased, and as a result of this decrease of life-span and beauty, the children of those whose life-span had been eighty thousand years lived for only forty thousand. (*The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, (1995) trans. M.Walshe, p.399f)

The text addresses several matters in relation to crisis in human society. One insight derivable from here is that a very single failure from the government may cause the collapse of whole body of society. What is more relevant for our discussion here is that poverty can stir violence in among people who are deprived of supply of daily necessities like food, clothing and health facilities. This is eternal and universal truth.

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In the *Anguttara Nikāya* the Buddha says that for the person who enjoys sense pleasures poverty (*daliddiya*) is miserable. Poverty leads to borrowings and borrowings lead to the piling up of debts. When one who is in debt is taken to task by the lenders it becomes a great suffering. Here, the Buddha says that in the discipline of the noble ones, the absence of faith in moral qualities, the absence of shame to lead an immoral life, the absence of fear to lead an immoral life, the absence of effort to cultivate moral qualities, and the absence of wisdom or insight to cultivate moral qualities may be called poverty. Such poverty is even more miserable than the poverty resulting from the lack of material resources.⁵

Buddhist texts say that poverty will grow up if poor people are not given wealth to generate income. The wealth is given for the purposes of family expenditure, investment, and to fulfil social obligations. To eliminate hunger among humans, Buddhist texts speak not only of the energetic production of wealth but the consequent increase of purchasing power and the dynamic production of food through industriously handled agriculture. (Dhammavihari p.23 in Wimalarathana,, 'Buddhism and Poverty Reduction in Sri Lanka,' p.10)

Overcoming violence through violence

According to the human history, in face of poverty, public uprisings against governing bodies is natural. In the western history, French Revolution and Russian revolution are well-illustrative of this reality. In the Buddhist tradition, the attempt to crush the public who rebel against government due to poverty has been declared futile. It is recorded in the following mythical account comes in the sutta called *Kutadanta Sutta*:

"The chaplain replied: "Your Majesty's country is beset by thieves, it is ravaged, villages and towns are being destroyed, the countryside is infested with brigands. If Your Majesty were to tax this region, that would be the wrong thing to do. Suppose Your Majesty were to think: 'I will get rid of this plague of robbers by executions and imprisonment, or by confiscation, threats and banishment', the plague would not be properly ended. Those who survived would later harm Your Majesty's realm. (*The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, (1995) trans. M.Walshe,p.135)

The way to achieve peace categorically lies in economically empowering the communities. It is put in the same text as follows:

To those in the kingdom who are engaged in cultivating crops and raising cattle, let Your Majesty distribute grain and fodder; to those in trade, give capital; to those in government service assign proper living wages. Then those people, being intent on their own occupations, will not harm the kingdom.

⁵ AN.III.351: *Iti kḥo, bhikkhave, daliddiyampi dukkhaṃ lokasmīṃ kāmabhogino, iṇādanampi dukkhaṃ lokasmīṃ kāmabhogino, vaḍḍhipi dukkhaṃ lokasmīṃ kāmabhogino, codanāpi dukkhaṃ lokasmīṃ kāmabhogino, anucariyāpi dukkhaṃ lokasmīṃ kāmabhogino, bandhanampi dukkhaṃ lokasmīṃ kāmabhogino*; MA.125: 是為世中有欲人貧窮是大苦，世中有欲人舉貸財物是大苦，世中有欲人舉貸長息是大苦，世中有欲人財主責索是大苦，世中有欲人財主數往至彼求索是大苦，世中有欲人為財主收縛是大苦。

Your Majesty's revenues will be great, the land will be tranquil and not beset by thieves, and the people, with joy in their hearts, will play with their children, and will dwell in open houses. (*The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, (1995) trans. M.Walshe,p.135f)

Peace

The Religions for Peace International upholds promoting peace as its mission for the world. Buddhism has been seen a message promoting peace. Buddhism has come up an educational system that train the individuals to be peaceful. This training is expressed in the three-stepped ethical-course, morality, mental cultivation and wisdom. One cultivates these virtues transforms himself/herself into a non-violent person. Peace is generally understood as absences of violence. The Buddhist monk is supposed to keep away from all sort of violence (na samano hoti param vihethayanto-Dhammapada).

However, violence is not practiced at individual level, but it can manifest in large scales like intra-state wars or international wars. As the Buddha said, to possess material wealth, clans may clash with clans and kings with kings (Mahadukkhakkhandha Sutta). Moreover, the reason for violence lies in unwholesome mental states (akusalamulani), greed, hatred and ignorance. Greed motivates the person to possess the objects limitlessly. This can cause competition and eventually there will arise violence among the members of human civilization. If we look at alternative theories regarding the causes of the world wars in the world history, had been craving to possess the resources remaining in others' territories.

On the other hand, Buddhism recognize the fact that once poverty prevails, the peace disappears from such a country. This is explained in the Cakkavattisihanada Sutta and it is said that with the growth of poverty, theft, weapon, killings increased. Finally, man was lead to brutal condition. Thus, we can see, there are many factors contributing to maintain peace.

Economic Empowerment and Buddhism

Economic empowerment means person has free of choice in the sphere of economy. In Buddhism, there are moral restrictions to avoid certain businesses like slavery and weapon. Apart from these, any profession under moral sanction are permissible. Morality is for the well-being of man and eco-system. By criticizing the caste system, the Buddha wanted to break the chains of professional limitations and open the freedom of choice in economic field and social hierarchy. According to the caste system, profession comes by birth but not by personal preference and skill. By challenging the fixation or determination both in philosophical discourse (by the denial of hard determinism opposed by Ajivika traditions and Divine creation, in the form of self-causation and other causation theories' on the doctrine of action and result-kamma/karma) and social practice, the Buddhist tradition helped the public to lead a life of freedom.

Theoretically, understanding the variety of person type is very critical in maximizing productivity of the persons. This is recognized in Buddhist tradition under the concept 'puggala vemattata' (difference of personalities). So, whether it is economic sector or any other sector of human activity, man should be able to exercise his/her freedom so that he/she could bring forth best for the world.

Buddhism as communal phenomenon

For Sri Lankan Buddhists, Buddhism is not merely a set of religious beliefs but it is the way of life. If it is the way of life, then it must be able to provide guidance for difficulties met in daily-life. History how Buddhism got into the innermost world of people's life, shows that Buddhism possesses enormous potential to help people. The Buddhist community is composed of four categories, monastic men and women (monks and nuns) and lay men and women. Unity of theirs has been praised by the Buddha, the teacher and emphasized as a factor of benefit for all parties. It has to be mentioned here that Sri Lanka being a very small nation and Buddhists being a very small population compared to some invaders in the history, the unity of the Buddhists was the only weapon the Buddhists had to survive and protect their religion. However, the current situation in the country is not a matter of religion or culture but whole Sri Lankan nation. As a nation, all of us, irrespective of faith, ethnicity, identity or any other differences are faced with a serious economic crisis leaving vast majority of the population deprived of access to proper food,⁶ medicine, and other basic needs.

Under the leadership of the Buddhist monks and nuns, we are to support the general public in the country. Buddhist social activism and philanthropy is very effective in the world. There are examples from the Buddhist world, Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana regarding raising facilities for the deprived public.

Contributing to Economic Progress

Buddhism can contribute to the economic progress at the following two levels:

- I. International Level
- II. National Level

I.I International Strength

Sri Lanka is not an isolated country. All the four religions has larger four brotherhoods worldwide. As my focus is confined to Buddhism, I will discuss only about it here. So, Buddhism possesses a strong relation with Buddhist world.

Since the ancient times, Buddhism continues crossing borders of continents. Consequently, it has become one of the major religions in the world. To put in other way, it has won a strong brotherhood. It is a great capital for us to invest at this moment. Both monastic and lay Buddhist leadership must get together and deliberate how to capitalize the Buddhist brotherhood to emerge from Sri Lankan economic crisis.

Many Buddhist countries owe to Sri Lanka. Either they have received Buddhism directly from Sri Lanka or Buddhist texts have been borrowed from Sri Lanka or foreign masters have come to Sri

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Lanka to study Buddhism. This affinity is to be addressed and utilized for the betterment of the country.

Even today, Sri Lanka attracts a large number of foreign monks, nuns and lay students for Buddhist studies in Sri Lankan universities. It can be said that this a sector which has not been identified correctly by the governments as sector to improve and turn into an investing field. Outside Sri Lanka there is a competition to attract these students to other countries. In order to increase the inflow of the foreign students, we have to provide them with hostel facilities, online library facilities and standard English language proficiency programmes.

I.II. Education Centre/Buddhist Education

Thanks to the free education policy, Sri Lanka maintains one the highest literacy rates , 92.4 percent, one of the highest in the developing world. Is there a way to invest this to gain profits for the country? According to my naïve observation, we can offer low cost degree programmes. In some South Asian countries since the last several decades, have been running as education business. If not science, medicine and other subjects, we can develop humanities and social science subjects-based degree programmes and invite foreign students.

In this case, Buddhist masters have strong potential to contribute to establish institutes. The first such private Institute in the country today is Nagananda International Buddhist Institute at Manelwatta, Kelaniya. It is gradually increasing its number of foreign students. Without much voice, there are monks who run educational institutions, kindergartens, schools and vocational training schools. How about turning their services capable of earning foreign income? There are attitudinal limitations, challenges but if we address the point, we can overcome.

I.III. Promoting Tourism among Buddhist countries

As I personally know, there many people, specially Buddhists who are willing to come to Sri Lanka. The Buddhist masters are bringing tourists into the country in big numbers, as a support for them, of facilities inside the country must be improved. I would like to suggest here that the level of hygiene has to be increased all over the country so that we can keep tourists coming again and again into the country, for example, the roadside hotels and wash-room facilities are not up to the standard.

At the international level, the delegates must be arranged to Buddhist countries to promote mutual relations and discuss the limitations that avoid efficient movement between the countries.

Mapping the Buddhist world (increase fellow feeling)

- I. Theravada-04 (mainly- Cambodia, Thailand, Laos and Myanmar)
- II. Mahayana-06 (China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong)
- III. Vajrayana-03 (Tibet, Bhutan, Mongolia)
- IV. Miscellaneous (India, Nepal, Singapore, Malayasia, etc)
- V. New/ Buddhist Populations (USA, UK, Australia etc many European, Latin American and African Countries, Russia)

The government of Sri Lanka (secular agency) and Buddhist Leadership (religious leadership) must work together to **form a new diplomacy** that can get benefit from the Buddhist world for Sri Lanka to recover from economic crisis.

I.IV.Role of Religions for Peace International in Sri Lanka

It is clear at this moment, the faith based organizations are capable of contributing to the betterment of status quo. Specially, Sri Lanka at the moment, is in dire need of capable agencies. As it was mentioned, cognizations like BCC had pleaded for removal of debts of developing countries. This is a moment; this request has to be re-made for several countries who have recently undergone economic crises due to foreign debts. Religions for Peace International has 95 members, can they address the fellow countries about the Sri Lankan issue and does some positive involvement? In support of such request, I would like to draw attention to the following quotation which describes the efforts of world faiths to reduce poverty in the world:

...Jubilee Debt Campaign (JDC), also based in Britain, was the campaigning successor to Jubilee 2000, collecting together many of the leading lights of Britain's original Jubilee 2000 membership. JDC calls for total debt cancellation of the world's poorest countries' unpayable debt. In the USA, in addition, Jubilee USA also focuses on the issue of countries' unpayable debts in the developing world, while the Faith Action for People-Centered Development Policy... (Haynes 2015: 65)

Buddhism in Sri Lanka is not a mere set of teachings propounded by the Gautama Buddha but it is way of life. During the invasion times, it was the motivational force kept people brave and fighting for the country. During the times of tyranny or foreign invasions, it was the force worked to win the power of people. Now it is time for an economic struggle.

II.I. Buddhism based National Level Programmes

II.I.I. Exposing Sri Lankan culture to the World

Obviously, Sri Lanka entertains a great attraction of tourists every year. My understanding is the tourist locations can be extended. Throughout the country, there are historical places and monuments. Only the people living in such places know about these places. But, these places reveal an invaluable story and history of Sri Lanka. Using the latest technology, these places should be identified and open for the visit by both local and feign tourists.

For instance, Place: Yahangala Ancient Royal Temple

History : 2300 years(from the beginning of Rohana Kingdom in Southern Sri Lanka)

Ruins : Three pagodas in a line (very rare in Sri Lanka),

two adjacent drip-ledged caves and many other ruins on a top of a rock

Improving the tourist industry beyond the famous places will help the rural community to earn their living. And also it will carry the message of Sri Lankan ancient heritage into the world.

II.II. Welfare Programmes: Continuation from Covid-19

With the intervention of Buddhist monks, during the Covid-19, (2020-2022), I believe, a considerable amount of foreign donations reached the population. Even though Covid is overcome, economic difficulties are overwhelming. Sri Lanka still needs larger scale helps for daily life. Buddhist monks and

Buddhist organizations should be encouraged to continue their relief programmes for another few years.

Conclusion

To wind up, relation between economy and peace is invincible. Moreover, at the moment, Sri Lanka is a country which is hammered by international debt and poverty. The Present paper tried to show that Buddhism, one of the four major religions in the country has lot of potentials to contribute to the overcome economic crisis. It can be done at international level and local level. Further, the collaboration between religions and government in the country is essential to achieve some progress in future. Finally, the Religions for Peace International can take some initiatives to like faith based some organizations have tried to help Sri Lanka at international level.

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