

The Economics Of Buddha: Right To Livelihood And Human Dignity, A Conceptual Exploration

Dr. Reena Parti

Dept. of Economics

G.G.S.C.W. Sector 26, Chandigarh

“Were there a mountain all made of gold, doubled that would not be enough to satisfy a single person: know this and live accordingly”. **Samayutta Nikkaya 1.156**

Abstract:

The paper *The Economics of Buddha: Right to Livelihood and Human Dignity, A Conceptual Exploration*, is an attempt to explore the relationship between the Buddhist philosophy of right livelihood, mindfulness and the contemporary nuances of the concepts of right to livelihood and labour particularly the role of spiritual labour in economic framework. By revisiting the Buddha’s teachings on right livelihood, it examines how Buddhist ethics can inform economic practices, focusing on the ethical dimensions of work, the role of spiritual labour, and the balance between material and spiritual well-being. The paper aims to shed light on how an integration of these principles into modern economic frameworks can lead to a more just, compassionate, and sustainable world promoting societal well-being. In doing so, it seeks to offer a vision of economic practices that nurture human dignity, foster societal well-being, and achieve a balanced coexistence between material and spiritual fulfilment. The challenges of jobless growth, economic inequality, and ethical labour practices are not just material concerns but also moral and spiritual issues. By revisiting the teachings of the Buddha, this paper aims to highlight the ways in which these age-old principles can contribute to the creation of a more harmonious and sustainable global economy.

Keywords: Right Livelihood, Mindfulness, Spiritual Labour, Right to Livelihood, Human Dignity

Introduction

Buddhism, an ancient spiritual tradition, besides having emphasized upon the importance of inner peace, ethical living, and mindfulness, also offered profound insights into the realm of economics, particularly in relation to livelihood, labour, and the pursuit of well-being. At the heart of Buddhist philosophy lay a holistic approach to life that balances both material and spiritual growth, advocating for an existence where neither aspect is pursued at the expense of the other. This is encapsulated in the Buddhist principle of *Right Livelihood*, which guides individuals to engage in occupations that do not harm others and contribute to the welfare of society. *Schumacher* (1973) argued for an economic system that emphasized human well-being, (welfare of both individuals and society) over material accumulation, and cited Buddhist principles as a guiding framework for creating such a system that fostered compassion and

reduced suffering. *Norman* (1992) posited a view that wealth should be used for the benefit of the community, and that excessive accumulation leads to social instability and suffering. This idea also echoed in works of *Layard* (2005), who contended that wealth should be directed toward promoting happiness and social well-being, rather than exacerbating inequality and environmental degradation. *Franklin* (2005) and *Jonathans* (2014) explored the ethical dimension of work, emphasizing that contemporary economic systems should integrate spiritual well-being alongside material progress. Focus on 'Right Livelihood' helped reframe our understanding of work in terms of personal fulfilment, moral responsibility, and community well-being. The Buddhist concept of *Spiritual Labour*, focuses on cultivating wisdom, ethical conduct, and mental discipline, an essential perspective in rethinking economic practices in the modern world. This framework encourages a view of work that is not just about earning a living, but about aligning one's actions with compassion, mindfulness, a commitment to reduce suffering, and that the pursuit of economic well-being should not come at the expense of spiritual development. *Bodhi* (1998) emphasized the importance of cultivating right intention, right action, and right livelihood to ensure that one's work contributes to both personal enlightenment and societal harmony. *Loy* (2002) further, suggested that spiritual labour enables individuals to recognize the deeper interconnectedness of all life, which has profound implications for how we approach economics, labour, and environmental sustainability.

The intersection between Buddhist philosophy and economic theory has gained increasing attention in recent years. In a world increasingly defined by economic inequality, jobless growth, exploitation, and environmental degradation, the teachings of the Buddha provide an alternative framework for understanding work, wealth, and well-being addressing material poverty not just as a social issue but as a moral and spiritual imperative. *Estermann* (2008) aligning with Buddhist economics stated that poverty is not only a material condition but also a spiritual obstacle, for it hindered individuals from reaching their full potential, and that individuals are unable to fulfil their higher needs due to economic deprivation. *Bodhi* (2015) discussed how economic models based solely on growth and productivity ignore the ethical dimensions of labour and are bound to lead to inequality and social unrest. The integration of Buddhist teachings into human dignity and right to livelihood is also seen in the works of *Keynes* (1930) and of *Sen* (1999) who highlighted the importance of economic systems that ensure the well-being of all members of society, rather than merely focusing on aggregate wealth. While *Sen's* capability approach emphasized the opportunities and freedoms individuals needed to lead fulfilling lives, Buddhist economics added the dimension of ethical living and spiritual fulfilment as integral to human dignity.

Objective

- To explore the relationship between the Buddhist philosophy of right livelihood, mindfulness and contemporary nuances of the concepts of right to livelihood and human dignity.
- To examine how spiritual labour can be integrated into the modern economic systems

Right Livelihood and Spiritual Labour

Right Livelihood is a key element of the Buddhist Eightfold Path, which emphasizes ethical living. In the context of Buddhism, the concept of livelihood goes beyond simply earning a living—it calls for engaging in occupations that do not cause harm to others. The Fifth Fold of the Path (Right Livelihood) advises against trades that are inherently harmful, such as selling weapons, intoxicants, or engaging in activities that exploit others. The Seventh Fold (Right Mindfulness) emphasizes awareness and attention to thoughts, actions, and intentions, ensuring that one's livelihood does not contribute to harm or exploitation. In essence, Right Livelihood is intertwined with ethical conduct, mindfulness, and compassion.

In Dvichakku Sutta¹, the Buddha speaks about the importance of both, i.e. of acquiring wealth and being mindful of its usage (realizing its good and bad element). Wealth must be earned through righteous means, and its distribution should align with moral and ethical considerations. The example of the two-eyed person (Dvichakshu) is provided, illustrating that wealth should be used in ways that promote well-being of both the individual and the society as a whole. In a society where wealth is spent exclusively on personal satisfaction, social inequalities are worsened. If economic activities are not directed towards the collective good, they give rise to hatred, jealousy, and social unrest. Wealth must be earned and distributed in ways that reduce suffering and promotes the well-being of all members of society. Buddhist economics though emphasized upon use of wealth in favour of society, yet was against its hoarding. The circular flow of wealth for community growth was promoted and thus favoured even the one-eyed (ekchakshu) who spends wealth for his own pleasure abandoning and ignoring sharing and doing merits than one who hoards money (andha), for nothing.²

Spiritual Labor and Economic Well-being

The relationship between spiritual labour and economic well-being is crucial for understanding Buddhist economic principles. In Buddhism, all three forms of labour—physical, intellectual, and spiritual, have value when approached with the right intention and ethical conduct. Spiritual labour in the context of economics highlights the significance of balance—between material wealth and spiritual fulfilment in cultivation of virtues such as mindfulness, compassion, and wisdom. Integrating these principles into one's work, regardless of its nature, can transform ordinary labour into a path towards spiritual enlightenment, benefiting both the individual and society at large. Neither spiritual development nor the material development alone is adequate to lead a happy life. While economic systems typically focus on increasing wealth, Buddhist economics places equal emphasis on personal and community well-being. Achieving a balance between earning a livelihood and cultivating wisdom leads to a more harmonious and sustainable society.

Poverty and hunger are viewed as significant obstacles to spiritual progress. Without the basic necessities of life, one cannot fully engage in the practice of Dhamma or develop mental clarity. Hunger is treated as

the most serious illness, (jigaccha parama roga) and no pain is equal to it (khuda samma natthi narassa annam).³ Economic inequality, therefore, is not just a material issue—it is a moral and spiritual one.

Buddhist economics is interwoven with moral development and activities ought to be carried out in manner that they benefit both the doer and society at large. If people use wealth exclusively for their personal satisfaction without sharing, such a society makes way for creation of hatred, ill will, jealousy and commotion.⁴ If opportunities to share economic activities are limited then on one hand poverty would prevail and on the other hand activities like murder, rape, robbery, extortions would become the order of the day due to increasing inequalities.

Right to Livelihood and Human Dignity

Buddhism's call for a righteous livelihood aligns closely with contemporary ideas of human dignity and human rights. In modern economies, the right to a dignified life is inextricably linked to access to employment and the right to livelihood.

Human dignity is the spine of all human rights. An assurance of a dignified life calls forth a realization of the concept of Employment for All. Provisioning of the Employment for All, or the right to livelihood is of great significance for in its absence it would be like in words of Bhaduri (2004), putting the cart before the horse to talk about a range of human rights to enhance human capabilities.⁵ The absence of employment opportunities would imply an increase in poverty rates in the country and an overall development of individual is not possible so long as one lives in dire poverty and basic needs are not met. Often poverty springs from economic inequality. Though equality is neither necessary nor a sufficient condition for the absence of absolute poverty, yet glaring economic inequalities comprise the core that generates several kinds of deprivations. It was for this reason that equality formed the basic agenda for more human socio-economic reconstruction.⁶ The Supreme Court (1994) interpreted right to work as one of the positive rights guaranteed under article 21 of the Constitution. It held that income is the foundation of many fundamental rights and when the work is the only source of income, the right to work becomes as much fundamental. It held that Right to Life under Article 21 comprehended within its ambit 'equal wages for equal work as a fundamental right'.⁷ Thus livelihood begets food, food begets health, health enables work, and so on....and thus an organic dependence of subsistence rights compels one right to form a part of another.⁸

Thus, Right to Livelihood is an all-inclusive right. Growth can provide economic freedom to the people of a country provided it is employment oriented, for it would provide people with purchasing power, and thus deals with wealth aspect of happiness of the people. Yet, growth always does not lead to an increase in employment opportunities and the situation that exists is of 'jobless growth', i.e. employment opportunities are not automatically created out of growth. Jobless Growth indicates towards a situation in which a country's economy is growing fast but employment is not. Jobless growth results from an economy that becomes more productive without generating enough jobs to match the growing labour force. As such, while economic growth is essential for improving living standards, it is not sufficient on its own to address issues of unemployment and poverty. It thereby exacerbates existing social inequalities and

denies large sections of the population the opportunity to achieve economic freedom and personal fulfilment, thus raising questions about the sustainability and inclusivity of the modern economic systems.

Conclusion

Buddhist philosophy offers valuable insights into economic systems, advocating for a balance between material wealth and spiritual growth. Key concepts like Right Livelihood and spiritual labour emphasize ethical living, mindfulness, and compassion, focusing on human dignity, social well-being, and community welfare. Buddhist economics challenges us to rethink work and wealth, prioritizing occupations that benefit all and reduce harm. In the face of issues like poverty and inequality, and jobless growth Buddhist economics presents an ethical alternative to exploitative and unsustainable economic practices. The notion of the right to livelihood aligns closely with human dignity, ensuring that all individuals have the opportunity to earn a living that supports both their material and spiritual needs. To move toward a more compassionate, equitable world, we must integrate these Buddhist principles into modern economic systems. A focus on inclusive, employment-oriented growth that prioritizes human well-being and dignity, alongside spiritual development, can pave the way for a future where prosperity and happiness are shared by all, and the pursuit of economic well-being never comes at the expense of spiritual fulfilment.

Notes

1. The Dwichakku Sutta is a Buddhist discourse that is part of the Anguttara Nikaya that discusses the plea to adopt Buddhist economics.
2. Sanyutta Nikaya, supra-mandane
3. Dhammapada, p. 120
4. Vyaggapajja Sutta, Four Discourses of the Buddha, The Conditions of Welfare
5. Bhaduri, A., 2004, December 27
6. Haq, M. 1978
7. Murlidhar Dayandeo Kesekar v/s Vishwanat Pandu Barde, 1995 Supp (2) SC549. In an important judgement delivered in April 2004, the Supreme Court held that despite the fact that employees were performing similar duties and their posts were being interchangeable, a valid classification can be made on the basis of their educational qualifications.
8. The court added that ‘fundamental rights can ill afford to be consigned to the limbo of undefined premises and uncertain applications. That will be a mockery of them. The right to public employment and its concomitant right to livelihood receive their succour and nourishment under the canopy of the protective umbrella of articles 14, 16(1), 19(1)g, and 21. Right to livelihood is an integral part of right to life, Narender Kumar v. State of Haryana, JT (1994) 2 SC 94: (1994) 4 SCC (L&S) 882 FLR 1995 SC 519

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