

# **Buddhist Economics**

## **A Middle Way for the Market Place**

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#### Chapter Three

##### Buddhist Perspectives on Economic Concepts

The basic model of economic activity is often represented in economic textbooks thus: unlimited wants are controlled by scarcity; scarcity requires choice; choice involves an opportunity cost (i.e., choosing one means foregoing the other); and the final goal is maximum satisfaction.[1] The fundamental concepts occurring in this model -- want, choice, consumption and satisfaction -- describe the basic activities of our lives from an economic perspective. These concepts are based on certain assumptions about human nature. Unfortunately, the assumptions modern economists make about human nature are somewhat confused.

Buddhism, on the other hand, offers a clear and consistent picture of human nature: a view which encompasses the role of ethics and the twofold nature of human desire. Let us now take a look at some economic concepts in the light of Buddhist thinking.

#### Value

In the previous chapter, we discussed the two kinds of desire, chanda and tanha. Given that there are two kinds of desire, it follows that there are two kinds of value, which we might term true value and artificial value. True value is created by chanda. In other words, a commodity's true value is determined by its ability to meet the need for well-being. Conversely, artificial value is created by tanha -- it is a commodity's capacity to satisfy the desire for pleasure.

To assess an object's value, we must ask ourselves which kind of desire -- tanha or chanda -- defines it. Fashionable clothes, jewelry, luxury cars and other status-symbols contain a high degree of artificial value because they cater to people's vanity and desire for pleasure. A luxury car may serve the same function as a cheaper car, but it commands a higher price largely because of its artificial value. Many of the pleasures taken for granted in today's consumer society -- the games, media thrills and untold forms of junk foods available -- are created solely for the purpose of satisfying tanha, have no practical purpose at all and are often downright detrimental to well-being. For the most part, advertising promotes this artificial value. Advertisers stimulate desires by projecting pleasurable images onto the products they sell. They induce us to believe, for example, that whoever can afford a luxury car will stand out from the crowd and be a member of high society, or that by drinking a certain brand of soft drink we will have lots of friends and be happy.

The true value of an object is typically overshadowed by its artificial value. Craving and conceit, and the desire for the fashionable and sensually appealing, cloud any reckoning of the true value of things. How many people, for instance, reflect on the true value or reasons for eating food or wearing clothes?

## Consumption

The question of consumption is similar to that of value. We must distinguish which kind of desire our consumption is intended to satisfy: is it to answer the need for things of true value, or to indulge in the pleasures afforded by artificial value? Consumption is said to be one of the goals of economic activity. However, economic theory and Buddhism define consumption differently.

Consumption is the alleviation or satisfaction of desire, that much is agreed. Modern economics defines consumption as simply the use of goods and services to satisfy demand. Buddhism, however, distinguishes between two kinds of consumption, which might be termed "right" consumption and "wrong" consumption. Right consumption is the use of goods and services to satisfy the desire for true well-being. It is consumption with a goal and a purpose. Wrong consumption arises from *tanha*; it is the use of goods and services to satisfy the desire for pleasing sensations or ego-gratification.

While the Buddhist perspective is based on a wide view of the stream of causes and effects, the specialized thinking of economics identifies only part of the stream: demand leads to consumption which leads to satisfaction. For most economists that's the end of it, there's no need to know what happens afterwards. In this view, consumption can be of anything whatsoever, so long as it results in satisfaction. There is little consideration of whether or not well-being is adversely affected by that consumption.

Consumption may satisfy sensual desires, but its true purpose is to provide well-being. For example, our body depends on food for nourishment. Consumption of food is thus a requirement for well-being. For most people, however, eating food is also a means to experience pleasure. If in consuming food one receives the experience of a delicious flavor, one is said to have satisfied one's desires. Economists tend to think in this way, holding that the experience of satisfaction is the end result of consumption. But here the crucial question is: What is the true purpose of consuming food: satisfaction of desires or the attainment of well-being?

In the Buddhist view, when consumption enhances true well-being, it is said to be successful. On the other hand, if consumption results merely in feelings of satisfaction, then it fails. At its worst, consumption through *tanha* destroys its true objective, which is to enhance well-being. Heedlessly indulging in desires with no regard to the repercussions often leads to harmful effects and a loss of true well-being. Moreover, the compulsive consumption rampant in consumer societies breeds inherent dissatisfaction. It is a strange thing that economics, the science of human well-being and satisfaction, accepts, and indeed lauds, the kind of consumption that in effect frustrates the realization of its own objectives.

By contrast, right consumption always contributes to well-being and forms a basis for the further development of human potentialities. This is an important point often overlooked by economists. Consumption guided by chanda does much more than just satisfy one's desire; it contributes to well-being and spiritual development. This is also true on a global scale. If all economic activities were guided by chanda, the result would be much more than just a healthy economy and material progress – such activities would contribute to the whole of human development and enable humanity to lead a nobler life and enjoy a more mature kind of happiness.

### Moderation

At the very heart of Buddhism is the wisdom of moderation. When the goal of economic activity is seen to be satisfaction of desires, economic activity is open-ended and without clear definition – desires are endless. According to the Buddhist approach, economic activity must be controlled by the qualification that it is directed to the attainment of well-being rather than the "maximum satisfaction" sought after by traditional economic thinking. Well-being as an objective acts as a control on economic activity. No longer are we struggling against each other to satisfy endless desires. Instead, our activities are directed toward the attainment of well-being. If economic activity is directed in this way, its objectives are clear and its activities are controlled. A balance or equilibrium is achieved. There is no excess, no overconsumption or overproduction. In the classical economic model, unlimited desires are controlled by scarcity, but in the Buddhist model they are controlled by an appreciation of moderation and the objective of well-being. The resulting balance will naturally eliminate the harmful effects of uncontrolled economic activity.

Buddhist monks and nuns traditionally reflect on moderation before each meal by reciting this reflection:

"Wisely reflecting, we take alms food, not for the purpose of fun, not for indulgence or the fascination of taste, but simply for the maintenance of the body, for the continuance of existence, for the cessation of painful feeling, for living the higher life. Through this eating, we subdue old painful feelings of hunger and prevent new painful feelings (of overeating) from arising. Thus do we live unhindered, blameless, and in comfort." [M.I.10; Nd. 496]

The goal of moderation is not restricted to monastics: whenever we use things, be it food, clothing, or even paper and electricity, we can take the time to reflect on their true purpose, rather than using them heedlessly. By reflecting in this way we can avoid heedless consumption and so understand "the right amount," the "middle way."

We also come to see consumption as a means to an end, which is the development of human potential. With human development as our goal, we eat food not simply for the pleasure it affords, but to obtain the physical and mental energy necessary for intellectual and spiritual growth toward a nobler life.

## Non-consumption

Lacking a spiritual dimension, modern economic thinking encourages maximum consumption. It praises those who eat the most -- three, four or more times a day. If someone were to eat ten times a day, so much the better. By contrast, a Buddhist economics understands that non-consumption can contribute to well-being. Though monks eat only one meal a day, they strive for a kind of well-being that is dependent on little.

On Observance days, some Buddhist laypeople also refrain from eating after midday and, in so doing, contribute to their own well-being. Renunciation of the evening meal allows them to spend time in meditation and reflection on the Buddha's teachings. The body is light and the mind easily calmed when the stomach is not full. Thus Buddhism recognizes that certain demands can be satisfied through non-consumption, a position which traditional economic thinking would find hard to appreciate. Refraining from eating can play a role in satisfying our nonmaterial, spiritual needs.

It's not that getting down to eating one meal a day is the goal, of course. Like consumption, non-consumption is only a means to an end, not an end in itself. If abstinence did not lead to well-being, it would be pointless, just a way of mistreating ourselves. The question is not whether to consume or not to consume, but whether or not our choices lead to self-development.

## Overconsumption

Today's society encourages overconsumption. In their endless struggle to find satisfaction through consuming, a great many people damage their own health and harm others. Drinking alcohol, for instance, satisfies a desire, but is a cause of ill-health, unhappy families and fatal accidents. People who eat for taste often overeat and make themselves ill. Others give no thought at all to food values and waste money on junk foods. Some people even become deficient in certain vitamins and minerals despite eating large meals every day. (Incredibly, cases of malnutrition have been reported.) Apart from doing themselves no good, their overeating deprives others of food.

So we cannot say that a thing has value simply because it provides pleasure and satisfaction. If satisfaction is sought in things that do not enrich the quality of life, the result often becomes the destruction of true welfare, leading to delusion and intoxication, loss of health and well-being.

A classic economic principle states that the essential value of goods lies in their ability to bring satisfaction to the consumer. Here we may point to the examples given above where heavy consumption and strong satisfaction have both positive and negative results. The Buddhist perspective is that the benefit of goods and services lies in their ability to provide the consumer with a sense of satisfaction at having enhanced the quality of his or

her life. This extra clause is essential. All definitions, whether of goods, services, or personal and social wealth, must be modified in this way.

### Contentment

While not technically an economic concern, I would like to add a few comments on the subject of contentment. Contentment is a virtue that has often been misunderstood and, as it relates to consumption and satisfaction, it seems to merit some discussion.

The tacit objective of economics is a dynamic economy where every demand and desire is supplied and constantly renewed in a never-ending and ever-growing cycle. The entire mechanism is fueled by *tanha*. From the Buddhist perspective, this tireless search to satisfy desires is itself a kind of suffering. Buddhism proposes the cessation of this kind of desire, or contentment, as a more skillful objective.

Traditional economists would probably counter that without desire, the whole economy would grind to a halt. However, this is based on a misunderstanding of the nature of contentment. People misunderstand contentment because they fail to distinguish between the two different kinds of desire, *tanha* and *chanda*. We lump them together, and in proposing contentment, dismiss them both. A contented person comes to be seen as one who wants nothing at all. Here lies our mistake.

Obviously, people who are content will have fewer wants than those who are discontent. However, a correct definition of contentment must be qualified by the stipulation that it implies only the absence of artificial want, that is *tanha*; *chanda*, the desire for true well-being, remains. In other words, the path to true contentment involves reducing the artificial desire for sense-pleasure, while actively encouraging and supporting the desire for quality of life.

These two processes -- reducing *tanha* and encouraging *chanda* -- are mutually supportive. When we are easily satisfied in material things, we save time and energy that might otherwise be wasted on seeking objects of *tanha*. The time and energy we save can, in turn, be applied to the development of well-being, which is the objective of *chanda*. When it comes to developing skillful conditions, however, contentment is not a beneficial quality. Skillful conditions must be realized through effort. Too much contentment with regards to *chanda* easily turns into complacency and apathy. In this connection, the Buddha pointed out that his own attainment of enlightenment was largely a result of two qualities: unremitting effort, and lack of contentment with skillful conditions. [D.III.214; A.I.50; Dhs. 8, 234]

### Work

Buddhist and conventional economics also have different understandings of the role of work. Modern Western economic theory is based on the view that work is something that we are compelled to do in order to obtain money for consumption. It is during the time when we are not working, or "leisure time," that we may experience happiness and

satisfaction. Work and satisfaction are considered to be separate and generally opposing principles.

Buddhism, however, recognizes that work can either be satisfying or not satisfying, depending on which of the two kinds of desire is motivating it. When work stems from the desire for true well-being, there is satisfaction in the direct and immediate results of the work itself. By contrast, when work is done out of desire for pleasure-objects, then the direct results of the work itself are not so important. With this attitude, work is simply an unavoidable necessity to obtain the desired object. The difference between these two attitudes determines whether or not work will directly contribute to well-being. In the first case, work is a potentially satisfying activity, and in the second, it is a necessary chore.

As an example of these two different attitudes, let us imagine two research workers. They are both investigating natural means of pest control for agricultural use. The first researcher, Mr. Smith, desires the direct fruits of his research -- knowledge and its practical application -- and takes pride in his work. The discoveries and advances he makes afford him a sense of satisfaction.

The second, Mr. Jones, only works for money and promotions. Knowledge and its application, the direct results of his work, are not really what he desires; they are merely the means through which he can ultimately obtain money and position. Mr. Jones doesn't enjoy his work, he does it because he feels he has to.

Work performed in order to meet the desire for well-being can provide inherent satisfaction, because it is appreciated for its own sake. Achievement and progress in the work lead to a growing sense of satisfaction at every stage of the work's development. In Buddhist terminology, this is called working with chanda. Conversely, working out of desire for pleasure is called working with tanha. Those working with tanha are motivated by the desire to consume. But since it is impossible to consume and work at the same time, the work itself affords little enjoyment or satisfaction. It should also be pointed out that work in this case postpones the attainment of satisfaction, and as such will be seen as an impediment to it. When work is seen as an impediment to consumption it can become intolerable. In developing countries this is readily seen in the extent of hire-purchase debt and corruption, where consumers cannot tolerate the delay between working and consuming the objects of their desires.

In modern industrial economies, many jobs preclude satisfaction, or make it very difficult, by their very nature. Factory jobs can be dull, undemanding, pointless, even dangerous to health. They breed boredom, frustration, and depression, all of which have negative effects on productivity. However, even in menial or insignificant tasks, there is a difference between working with tanha and working with chanda. Even in the most monotonous of tasks, where one may have difficulty generating a sense of pride in the object of one's labors, a desire to perform the task well, or a sense of pride in one's own endeavors, may help to alleviate the monotony, and even contribute something of a sense of achievement to the work: even though the work may be monotonous, one feels that at

least one is developing good qualities like endurance and is able to derive a certain enthusiasm for the work.

As we have seen, the fulfillment of tanha lies with seeking and obtaining objects which provide pleasant feelings. While this seeking may involve action, the objective of tanha is not directly related in a causal way to the action undertaken. Let's look at two different tasks and examine the cause and effect relationships involved: (1) Mr. Smith sweeps the street, and is paid \$500 a month; (2) If Little Suzie finishes the book she is reading, Daddy will take her to the movies.

It may seem at first glance that sweeping the street is the cause for Mr. Smith receiving his wage; that is, sweeping the street is the cause, and money is the result. But in fact, this is a mistaken conclusion. Correctly speaking, one would say: the action of sweeping the street is the cause for the street being cleaned; the cleanness of the street is a stipulation for Mr. Smith receiving his wage, based on an agreement between employer and employee.

All actions have results that arise as a natural consequence. The natural result of sweeping the street is a clean street. In the contract between employer and employee, a stipulation is added to this natural result, so that sweeping the street also brings about a payment of money. This is a man-made, or artificial, law. However, money is not the natural result of sweeping the street: some people may sweep a street and get no money for it, while many other people receive wages without having to sweep streets. Money is a socially contrived or artificial condition. Many contemporary social problems result from confusion between the natural results of actions and the human stipulations added to them. People begin to think that a payment of money really is the natural result of sweeping a street, or, to use another example, that a good wage, rather than medical knowledge, is the natural result of studying medicine.

As for Little Suzie, it may seem that completing the book is the cause, and going to the movies with Dad is the result. But in fact finishing the book is simply a stipulation on which going to the movies is based. The true result of reading the book is obtaining knowledge.

Expanding on these examples, if Mr. Smith's work is directed solely by tanha, all he wants is his \$500, not the cleanness of the street. In fact, he doesn't want to sweep the street at all, but, since it is a condition for receiving his wage, he must. As for Little Suzie, if her true desire is to go to the movies (not to read the book), then reading will afford no satisfaction in itself; she only reads because it is a condition for going to the movies.

When people work solely out of tanha, their true desire is for consumption, not action. Their actions – in this case, sweeping and reading – are seen as means of obtaining the objects of desire – the salary and a trip to the movies. When they work with chanda, on the other hand, Mr. Smith takes pride in (i.e., desires) the cleanness of the street and little Suzie wants the knowledge contained in the book. With chanda, their desire is for action

and the true results of that action. Cleanness is the natural result of sweeping the street and knowledge is the natural result of reading the book. When the action is completed, the result naturally and simultaneously arises. When Mr. Smith sweeps the street, a clean street ensues, and it ensues whenever he sweeps. When Little Suzie reads a book, knowledge arises, and it arises whenever she reads the book. With chanda, work is intrinsically satisfying because it is itself the achievement of the desired result.

Thus, the objective of chanda is action and the good result which arises from it. When their actions are motivated by chanda, Mr. Smith applies himself to sweeping the street irrespective of his monthly wage, and little Suzie will read her book even without Daddy having to promise to take her to the movies. (In reality, of course, most people do work for the wages, which are a necessity, but we also have the choice to take pride in our work and strive to do it well, which is chanda, or to do it perfunctorily simply for the wage. Thus, in real life situations, most people are motivated by varying degrees of both tanha and chanda.)

As we have seen, actions motivated by chanda and actions motivated by tanha give rise to very different results, both objectively and ethically. When we are motivated by tanha and are working simply to attain an unrelated object or means of consumption, we may be tempted to attain the object of desire through other means which involve less effort. If we can obtain the objective without having to do any work at all, even better. If it is absolutely necessary to work for the objective, however, we will only do so reluctantly and perfunctorily.

The extreme result of this is criminal activity. If Mr. Smith wants money but has no desire (chanda) to work, he may find working for the money intolerable and so resort to theft. If Little Suzie wants to go the movies, but can't stand reading the book, she may steal money from her mother and go to the movies herself.

With only tanha to get their salary but no chanda to do their work, people will only go about the motions of performing their duties, doing just enough to get by. The result is apathy, laziness and poor workmanship. Mr. Smith simply goes through the motions of sweeping the street day by day until pay day arrives, and Little Suzie reads the book simply to let Daddy see that she has finished it, but doesn't take in anything she has read, or she may cheat, saying she has read the book when in fact she hasn't.

When sloppiness and dishonesty of this type arise within the work place, secondary checks must be established to monitor the work. These measures address the symptoms but not the cause, and only add to the complexity of the situation. For example, it may be necessary to install a supervisor to inspect Mr. Smith's work and check his hours; or Little Suzie's brother may have to look in and check that she really is reading the book. This applies to employers as well as employees: workers' tribunals must be established to prevent greedy or irresponsible employers from exploiting their workers and making them work in inhumane conditions or for unfair wages. When tanha is the motivating force, workers and employers are trapped in a game of one-upmanship, with each side trying to get as much for themselves as they can for the least possible expense.

Tanha is escalated to a considerable extent by social influences. For instance, when the owners of the means of production are blindly motivated by a desire to get rich for as little outlay as possible, it is very unlikely that the workers will have much chanda. They will be more likely to follow the example of their employers, trying to get as much as they can for as little effort as possible. This tendency can be seen in the modern work place. It seems, moreover, that the more affluent a society becomes, the more this tendency is produced – the more we have, the more we want. This is a result of the unchecked growth of tanha and the lack of any viable alternative. Meanwhile, the values of inner contentment and peace of mind seem to have been all but lost in modern society.

In rare cases, however, we hear of employers and employees who do work together with chanda. This happens when the employer is responsible, capable and considerate, thus commanding the confidence and affection of employees, who in return are harmonious, diligent, and committed to their work. There have even been cases of employers who were so caring with their employees that when their businesses failed and came close to bankruptcy, the employees sympathetically made sacrifices and worked as hard as possible to make the company profitable again. Rather than making demands for compensation, they were willing to take a cut in wages.

### Production and Non-production

The word "production" is misleading. We tend to think that through production new things are created, when in fact it is merely changes of state which are effected. One substance or form of energy is converted into another. These conversions entail the creation of a new state by the destruction of an old one. Thus production is always accompanied by destruction. In some cases the destruction is acceptable, in others it is not. Production is only truly justified when the value of the thing produced outweighs the value of that which is destroyed. In some cases it may be better to refrain from production. This is invariably true for those industries whose products are for the purpose of destruction. In weapons factories, for example, non-production is always the better choice. In industries where production entails the destruction of natural resources and environmental degradation, non-production is sometimes the better choice. To choose, we must distinguish between production with positive results and production with negative results; production that enhances well-being and that which destroys it.

In this light, non-production can be a useful economic activity. A person who produces very little in materialistic terms may, at the same time, consume much less of the world's resources and lead a life that is beneficial to the world around him. Such a person is of more value than one who diligently consumes large amounts of the world's resources while manufacturing goods that are harmful to society. But modern economics could never make such a distinction; it would praise a person who produces and consumes (that is, destroys) vast amounts more than one who produces and consumes (destroys) little.

In the economics of the industrial era the term production has been given a very narrow meaning. It is taken to relate only to those things that can be bought and sold – a bull

fight, where people pay money to see bulls killed, is seen as contributing to the economy, while a child helping an elderly person across the street is not; a professional comedian telling jokes on stage, relaxing his audience and giving them a good time, is taken to be economically productive because money changes hands, while an office worker with a very cheerful disposition is not considered to have produced anything by his cheerfulness toward those around him. Nor is there any accounting of the economic costs of aggressive action and speech that continually create tension in the work place, so that those affected have to find some way to alleviate it with amusements, such as going to see a comedian.

### Competition and Cooperation

Modern economics is based on the assumption that it is human nature to compete. Buddhism, on the other hand, recognizes that human beings are capable of both competition and cooperation.

Competition is natural: when they are striving to satisfy the desire for pleasure -- when they are motivated by *tanha* -- people will compete fiercely. At such times they want to get as much as possible for themselves and feel no sense of sufficiency or satisfaction. If they can obtain the desired object without having to share it with anyone else, so much the better. Inevitably, competition is intense; this is natural for the mind driven by *tanha*.

This competitive instinct can be redirected to induce cooperation. One might unite the members of a particular group by inciting them to compete with another group. For example, corporate managers sometimes rally their employees to work together to beat their competitors. But this cooperation is based entirely on competition. Buddhism would call this "artificial cooperation."

True cooperation arises with the desire for well-being -- with *chanda*. Human development demands that we understand how *tanha* and *chanda* motivate us and that we shift our energies from competition towards cooperative efforts to solve the problems facing the world and to realize a nobler goal.

### Choice

"Whether a given want is a true need, a fanciful desire, or a bizarre craving is of no matter to economics. Nor is it the business of economics to judge whether such wants should be satisfied,"[2] say the economics texts, but from a Buddhist perspective the choices we make are of utmost importance, and these choices require some qualitative appreciation of the options available. Choice is a function of intention, which is the heart of *kamma*, one of Buddhism's central teachings. The influence of *kamma* affects not only economics but all areas of our lives and our social and natural environment. Economic decisions, or choices, which lack ethical reflection are bad *kamma* -- they are bound to bring undesirable results. Good economic decisions are those based on an awareness of the costs on the individual, social and environmental levels, not just in terms of production and consumption. These economic decisions are *kamma*. Every time an

economic decision is made, kamma is made, and the process of fruition is immediately set in motion, for better or for worse, for the individual, for society and the environment. Thus it is important to recognize the qualitative difference between different courses of action and to make our choices wisely.

### Life Views

I would now like to take a step back and look at economics from a somewhat wider perspective. We have discussed the various economic activities. We may now ask: what is the purpose of these activities? What are we striving for in all this buying and selling, producing and consuming? Or we may ask an even grander question: What indeed is the purpose of life?

Everybody holds views on these matters, although most of us are unconscious of them. Buddhist teachings stress that these views exert a tremendous influence on our lives. The Pali word for view is *ditthi*. This term covers all kinds of views on many different levels – our personal opinions and beliefs; the ideologies, religious and political views espoused by groups; and the attitudes and world-views held by whole cultures and societies.

Views lead to ramifications far beyond the realm of mental states and intellectual discourse. Like ethics, views are linked to the stream of causes and conditions. They are "subjective" mental formations that inevitably condition events in "objective" reality. On a personal level, one's world-view affects the events of life. On a national level, political views and social mores condition society and the quality of day-to-day life.

The Buddha warned that views are potentially the most dangerous of all mental conditions. Unskillful views can wreak unimaginable damage. The violence of the Crusades, Nazism and Communism, to name just three disastrous fanatical movements, were fueled by extremely unskillful views. Skillful views, on the other hand, are the most beneficial of mental conditions. As the Buddha said: "Monks, I see no other condition which is so much a cause for the arising of as yet unarisen unskillful conditions, and for the development and fruition of unskillful conditions already arisen, as wrong view ..." [A.I.30]

This begs the question: what view of life is behind modern economics? Is it a skillful or an unskillful one? At the risk of oversimplifying, let us say that the goal of modern life is to find happiness. This view is so pervasive in modern societies that it is rarely even recognized, let alone examined or questioned. The very concept of "progress" – social, economic, scientific and political – assumes that society's highest goal is to reach a state where everyone will be happy. The United States Declaration of Independence poetically embodies this ideal by asserting mankind's right to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

While certainly a good-hearted aspiration, the view that happiness is the goal of life betrays a fundamental confusion about the truth of life. "Happiness" is never more than an ill-defined, elusive quality. Many people equate happiness with sense pleasure and the

satisfaction of their desires. For these people, happiness remains a remote condition, something outside themselves, a future prize that must be pursued and captured. But happiness cannot be obtained through seeking, only through bringing about the causes and conditions which lead to it, and these are personal and mental development.

From the Buddhist point of view, people often confuse *tanha* – their restless craving for satisfaction and pleasure – with the pursuit of happiness. This is indeed an unskillful view, because the craving of *tanha* can never be satisfied. If the pursuit of happiness equals the pursuit of the objects of *tanha*, then life itself becomes a misery. To see the consequences of this unfortunate view, one need only witness the depression and angst of the citizens in so many modern cities filled with limitless distractions and pleasure centers. Rather than leading to contentment and well-being, the pursuit of happiness so often leads to restlessness and exhaustion in the individual, strife in society and unsustainable consumption of the environment.

By contrast, the Buddhist view of life is much less idealistic but much more practical. The Buddha said simply, "There is suffering." [Vin.I.9; S.V.421; Vbh.99] This was the first of his Four Noble Truths, the central tenets of Buddhism. He went on to describe what suffering is: "Birth is suffering; old age is suffering; sickness is suffering; death is suffering; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair are suffering; separation from the loved is suffering; getting what you don't want is suffering; not getting what you want is suffering ..."

There is little question that these things exist in life and they are all unpleasant, but the tendency of our society is to deny them. Death, in particular, is rarely thought or spoken about as a personal inevitability. Denying these things, however, does not make them go away. This is why the Buddha said that suffering is something that should be recognized. The first Noble Truth is the recognition that all things must pass and that ultimately there is no security to be had within the material world. This is the kind of truth the Buddha urged people to face – the painfully obvious and fundamental facts of life.

The second Noble Truth explains the cause of suffering. The Buddha said that suffering is caused by craving based on ignorance (that is, *tanha*). In other words, the cause of suffering is an internal condition. We may ask, "Does craving cause old age?": it is not craving that causes old age, but rather craving for youth which makes old age a cause of suffering. Old age is inevitable; craving is not. The Buddha said that craving can be eliminated, which brings us to the third Noble Truth, which concerns the cessation of suffering. With the complete and utter abandonment of craving, suffering ceases. But how to do that? In the fourth Noble Truth the Buddha tells how. It is the Noble Eightfold Path for the cessation of suffering, through training of body, speech and mind in accordance with the Buddhist code of Right View, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration.

It is fairly obvious from the Four Noble Truths that the Buddhist view of life is very much at odds with the view common to modern societies. Whereas Buddhism says "There is suffering," modern societies say, "There is happiness, and I want it now!" The

implications of this simple shift in perception are enormous. A society that views the purpose of life as the pursuit of happiness is one that is recklessly pursuing some future dream. Happiness is seen as something that is inherently lacking and must be found somewhere else. Along with this view comes dissatisfaction, impatience, contention, an inability to deal with suffering, and a lack of attention to the present moment.

On the other hand, with a view of life that appreciates the reality of suffering, we pay more attention to the present moment so that we can recognize problems when they arise. We cooperate with others to solve problems, rather than competing with them to win happiness. Such a view also influences our economic choices. Our production and consumption are geared less toward the pursuit of sense gratification (*tanha*) and more toward relieving suffering (*chanda*). If this Buddhist view were taken up on a national or global scale, rather than seeking to satisfy every demand, our economies would strive to create a state free of suffering, or a state which is primed for the enjoyment of happiness (just as a healthy body is one which is primed to enjoy happiness).

Only through understanding suffering can we realize the possibility of happiness. Here Buddhism makes a distinction between two kinds of happiness: dependent happiness and independent happiness. Dependent happiness is happiness that requires an external object. It includes any happiness contingent on the material world, including wealth, family, honor and fame. Dependent happiness, being dependent on things that can never be ours in an ultimate sense, is fickle and uncertain.

Independent happiness, on the other hand, is the happiness that arises from within a mind that has been trained and has attained some degree of inner peace. Such a happiness is not dependent on externals and is much more stable than dependent happiness.

Dependent happiness leads to competition and conflict in the struggle to acquire material goods. Any happiness arising from such activity is a contentious kind of happiness. There is, however, a third kind of happiness which, while not as exalted as the truly independent kind, is nevertheless more skillful than the contentious kind. It is a happiness that is more altruistically based, directed toward well-being and motivated by goodwill and compassion. Through personal development, people can appreciate this truer kind of happiness – the desire to bring happiness to others (which in Buddhism we call *metta*). With this kind of happiness, we can experience gladness at the happiness of others, just as parents feel glad at the happiness of their children. This kind of happiness might be called "harmonious happiness," as distinct from the contentious kind of happiness. It is less dependent on the acquisition of material goods and arises more from giving than receiving. Although such happiness is not truly independent, it is much more skillful than the happiness resulting from selfish acquisition.

The most assured level of happiness is the liberation resulting from enlightenment, which is irreversible. But even to train the mind, through study and meditation practice, to achieve some inner contentment is a powerful antidote to the dissatisfaction of the consumer society. And with the clarity of inner calm comes an insight into one of life's

profound ironies: striving for happiness, we create suffering; understanding suffering, we find peace.

Footnotes:

1. From "Economics '73-'74," Various Contributors, 1973, The Dushkin Publishing Group, Inc., Guildford, Connecticut.
2. From "Economics '73-'74," Various Contributors, 1973, The Dushkin Publishing Group, Inc., Guildford, Connecticut.