

Pave the Planet or Wear Shoes?

The greatest wealth is contentment.

—*The Dhammapada*

ACCORDING TO the traditional story, Shakyamuni Buddha renounced a privileged life of pleasure and leisure for the arduous life of a forest dweller, yet his ascetic practices did not produce the enlightenment he sought. He went on to discover a “middle way” that does not simply split the difference between sense enjoyment and sense denial. It focuses on calming and understanding the mind, for only insight can liberate us from our usual preoccupation with trying to become happy by satisfying our cravings. The goal is not to eradicate all desires but to experience them in a nonattached way, so that we are not controlled by them. Contrary to the stereotype of Buddhism as a world-denying religion, the Buddhist goal does not necessarily involve transcending this world in order to experience some other one. Rather, the goal is attaining a wisdom that realizes the true nature of this world, including the true nature of oneself, and through this wisdom being liberated from *dukkha*.

These concerns are reflected in the Buddhist attitude toward wealth and poverty. In the words of Russell Sizemore and Donald Swearer, “a non-attached orientation toward life does not require a flat renunciation of all material possessions. Rather, it specifies an attitude to be cultivated and expressed in whatever material condition one finds oneself. To be non-attached is to possess and use material things but not to be possessed or used by them.”³⁵ In short, the main issue is not how poor or wealthy we are, but how we respond to our situation. The wisdom that develops naturally from nonattachment is knowing how to be content with what we have.

This does not mean that Buddhism encourages poverty or denigrates wealth. The Buddha emphasized many times that the goal of the Buddhist path is to end our dukkha. None of the four ennobling truths implies that material poverty is a desirable state. Rather, poverty is a source of unhappiness in itself and also makes it more difficult to follow a spiritual path.

Nevertheless, Buddhism does not approve of a life devoted to acquiring wealth. The ultimate goal of liberating insight may be more difficult to pursue if we are destitute, yet a life focused on money may be as bad, or worse. Shakyamuni warned repeatedly against that danger: "Few are those people in

done in the past and are doing now. True wealth (not just of money) is a consequence of one's own previous generosity, and poverty a result of one's own misbehavior (most likely avarice or seeking wealth in an immoral way). Not all Buddhists accept that karma is so inexorable or understand it so literally, but the traditional belief implies (in the long run, at least) harmony between my morality and my prosperity.

BUDDHIST ECONOMICS

Everything so far concerns attitudes that we as individuals should cultivate, or

benefits most people, yet it is increasingly difficult to overlook the fact that business interests are usually allowed to trump all others. Whether globalization benefits the poor, it does further enrich the wealthy—those who have capital to invest.

However, notice also what the Lion's Roar Sutra does *not* say. Today we sometimes evaluate such situations by talking about the need for "social justice" and the state's role in "distributive justice." This emphasis on social justice, so important in the Abrahamic religions, is not found in traditional Buddhism. As the above story indicates, the Buddhist emphasis on karma implies a different way of understanding and addressing that social problem. The traditional Buddhist solution to poverty is *dana* (giving or generosity).

Dana is the most important concept in Buddhist thinking about society and economics, because it is the main way nonattachment is cultivated and demonstrated. Buddhists are called upon to show compassion to those who need our help. The doctrine of karma seems quite harsh insofar as it implies that such unfortunates are reaping the fruit of their previous deeds, yet this is not understood in a punitive way. Although they may be victims of their own previous selfishness, the importance of generosity for those walking the Buddhist path does not allow us the luxury of being indifferent to their situation. We are expected, even spiritually required, to lend assistance. This appeal is not to justice for victims of circumstances. Despite the prudential considerations expressed in the sutra—what may happen if we are not generous—it is the morality and spiritual progress of the *giver* that is the main issue. In the language of contemporary ethical theory, this is a "virtue ethics." It offers a different perspective that cuts through the usual political opposition between conservative (right) and liberal (left) economic views. According to Buddhism, no one can evade responsibility for his or her own deeds and efforts. At the same time, generosity is not optional: we are obligated to respond compassionately to those in need. In the Lion's Roar Sutra, the king started the social breakdown when he did not fulfill this obligation.

In modern times, however, the social consequences of *dana* in Asian Buddhist countries have usually been limited. The popular emphasis has been on "making merit" by supporting the sangha, the community of monks and nuns. The sangha is dependent on that support because monks and nuns are not allowed to work for money. Karma too is often understood in a commodified way, as something that can be accumulated by *dana*. Since the amount of merit gained is believed to depend not only upon the value of the

gift but also upon the worthiness of the recipient, and since members of the Buddhist sangha are by definition the most worthy recipients, one receives more merit from donating food to a well-fed bhikkhu than to a poor and hungry layperson.

This preoccupation with accumulating merit seems incompatible with the Buddhist emphasis on nonattachment, for it is liable to encourage a "spiritual materialism" ultimately at odds with the highest goal of spiritual liberation. The benefits of such merit-making redound to the rest of society, since the sangha is primarily responsible for practicing and propagating the teachings of Buddhism. Nevertheless, I believe that the present economic relationship between the sangha and laypeople needs to be reexamined. Rural Thailand, for example, needs hospitals and clinics more than it needs new temples. According to the popular view, however, a wealthy person gains more merit by funding the construction of a temple—whether or not one already exists in that area. Such a narrow but commonplace understanding of *dana* as merit-making has worked well to provide for sangha needs, but it cannot be an adequate spiritual response to the challenges provided by globalization.

One possible Buddhist alternative, or supplement, is the bodhisattva ideal emphasized in Mahayana Buddhism. The bodhisattva is a spiritually advanced person wholly devoted to responding to the needs of all living beings, not just those of the sangha. A bodhisattva's entire life is *dana*, not as a way to accumulate merit but because of the bodhisattva's insight that he or she is not separate from others. According to the usual understanding, a bodhisattva does not follow the eightfold path but a slightly different version that emphasizes perfecting six virtues: *dana*, *sila* (morality), *ksanti* (patience), *vīrya* (vigor), *dhyāna* (meditation), and *prajña* (wisdom). *Dana*, the first virtue, is believed to imply all the others.

Of course, such a religious model is not easily institutionalized. Yet that is not the main point. Although *dana* cannot substitute for social justice, there is also no substitute for the social practice of *dana* as a fundamental aspect of any healthy society. When those who possess much bear no responsibility for those who have nothing, a social crisis is inevitable.

A BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE ON GLOBALIZATION

Although traditional Buddhist teachings do not include a developed economic theory, we have already seen that they do have important economic

implications. Those implications can be further developed to help us understand and respond to the new world order being created by globalizing capitalism.

As the parable of the unwise king shows, Buddhism does not separate secular issues such as economics from ethical or spiritual ones. The notion that economics is a “social science”—discovering and applying objective, trans-cultural economic laws—obscures two relevant truths. First, the distributional issue of who gets what, and how they get it, always has moral dimensions, so that issues of production, exchange, and distribution should not be left solely to the dictates of the marketplace. If some people receive much more than they need, and many others receive much less, some sort of redistribution is necessary, as the Lion’s Roar Sutra implies. Dana is the traditional, if imperfect, Buddhist way of redistributing. Today that sort of response is obviously inadequate, all the more so because economic globalization is further aggravating the distribution problem between rich and poor. If capitalism can do a better job, as its supporters claim, what reforms are necessary to help it do so?

The other truth is that every system of production and consumption encourages the development of certain personal and social values while discouraging others. People make the system, but the system also makes people. Capitalism tends to reward those who have certain values and to penalize those who do not act according to those values. We need to consider not only what values will encourage and support responsible global capitalism but also what values global capitalism tends to encourage and support. As Phra Payutto, Thailand’s most distinguished scholar-monk, has put it:

It may be asked how it is possible for economics to be free of values when, in fact, it is rooted in the human mind. The economic process begins with want, continues with choice, and ends with satisfaction, all of which are functions of the mind. Abstract values are thus the beginning, the middle and the end of economics, and so it is impossible for economics to be value-free. Yet as it stands, many economists avoid any consideration of values, ethics, or mental qualities, despite the fact that these will always have a bearing on economic concerns.³⁸

This clarifies the basic Buddhist approach: individual and social values cannot be dissociated. A crucial issue is whether an economic system is conducive

to the ethical and spiritual development of its participants. When we evaluate the characteristics and consequences of global capitalism, therefore, we should consider not only its ecological impact, and how efficiently it produces and distributes goods, but also its effects on human values and the larger social consequences of those values.

In *The Moral Response to Global Capitalism*, John Dunning identifies three moral imperatives for responsible global capitalism: creativity, cooperation, and compassion. The order of their presentation does not seem to be accidental; capitalism prioritizes them in that way. So it is perhaps significant that Buddhism, like many other religious traditions, would prefer to reverse the order. The most important virtue in Buddhism is compassion, and community is also valued; but the capitalist emphasis on creativity receives little emphasis, because wealth creation has not been seen as a solution to the primarily spiritual problem of dukkha. On the other side, however, economists emphasize that economic growth is required for the reduction of our physical dukkha (hunger, inadequate health care, etc.), for they doubt that redistribution of existing wealth could be adequate to meet the needs of everyone even if it became politically possible. If this is true, it suggests more of a role for creativity and entrepreneurship than Buddhism has traditionally emphasized.

THE THREE POISONS

Much of the philosophical reflection on economics has focused on whether economic values are rooted in our basic human nature. Those who defend capitalism have usually argued that its emphasis on competition and personal gain is grounded in the fact that humans are fundamentally self-centered. The Scottish economist Adam Smith argued that, in a capitalist economy, the common good of society is promoted by each person pursuing his own self-interest—as if the whole process were supervised by “an invisible hand.” Critics of capitalism have responded by arguing that our human nature is less selfish and more cooperative, so the general good is better promoted by emphasizing social-democratic policies.

Early Buddhism avoids that debate by taking a different approach. Shakyamuni Buddha emphasized that we all have both wholesome and unwholesome traits. What is important is the practical matter of how to reduce our unwholesome characteristics—including “afflictive emotions” such as anger,

pride, lust, greed, and envy—and how to develop the more wholesome ones.³⁹ This process is symbolized by the lotus flower. Although rooted in the mud and muck at the bottom of a pond, the lotus grows upward to bloom on the surface, representing our potential to purify ourselves.

Our unwholesome characteristics are usually described as three poisons or roots of evil: greed, ill will, and delusion. As noted in previous chapters, the Buddhist path transforms all three into their positive counterparts: greed into generosity (*dana*), ill will into compassion, and delusion into wisdom. If collective economic values cannot be separated from personal moral values, we cannot evade the question: which traits encourage, and are encouraged by, the globalization of capitalism?

Greed / Generosity

Greed is an unpopular word both in corporate boardrooms and in economic theory. The economist's concern with being objective does not allow the moral evaluation of different types of demand. From a Buddhist perspective, however, it is difficult to ignore how capitalism promotes and even requires greed. It does so in two ways: the engine of the economic process is the continual desire for profit, and in order to keep making that profit, consumers must continue wanting to consume more.

These forms of motivation have been extraordinarily successful—depending, of course, on one's definition of success. According to the Worldwatch Institute, more goods and services were consumed in the forty years between 1950 and 1990 (measured in constant dollars) than by all the previous generations in human history.⁴⁰ Although such a claim is difficult to verify, it remains relevant and shocking. Significantly, this was not simply a matter of meeting latent demand: according to the United Nations Human Development Report (UNHDR) for 1999, the world spent at least \$435 billion the previous year for advertising, not including public relations and marketing.

While this growth has given us opportunities that our grandparents never dreamed of, we have also become more sensitive to its negative consequences, including the staggering ecological impact and the unequal distribution of this new wealth. Whether or not this global maldistribution is worsening or improving, and how much of that maldistribution is a consequence of globalizing capitalism, are controversial issues, yet present inequities are certainly great and seem to be worsening. According to the 1998 UNHDR, in the 1960s the 20 percent of the world's people who live in

the richest countries had 30 times the income of the poorest 20 percent; by 1995 that figure had increased to 82 times. The assets of the world's three richest people are greater than the combined GNP of the 48 poorest countries, and in 59 countries, average income is lower than it was 25 years ago.

But these grim facts about "their" *dukkha* should not keep us from noticing the consequences for "our own" *dukkha*. From a Buddhist perspective, the fundamental problem with consumerism is the delusion that consuming is the way to become happy. If (as the second noble truth claims) insatiable desires are the source of the dis-ease that we experience in our daily lives, then such consumption, which distracts us and intoxicates us, is not the solution to our unhappiness but one of its main symptoms. That brings us to the final irony of our addiction to consumption: according to the same 1999 report, the percentage of Americans who considered themselves happy peaked in 1957, despite the fact that consumption per person has more than doubled since then. Nevertheless, studies of U.S. households have found that between 1986 and 1994 the amount of money people *think* they need to be happy has doubled. That seems paradoxical, but it is not difficult for Buddhism to explain. Once we define ourselves as consumers, we can never have enough, because consumerism can never really give us what we want from it. It is always the *next* thing we buy that will make us happy.

Higher incomes have enabled many people to be more generous in certain respects, but increased *dana* charity or philanthropy has not been the main effect because capitalism is based upon a different principle, that extra capital should be used to generate more capital. Rather than redistributing our wealth, as the Buddhist king in the Lion's Roar Sutra was encouraged to do, we prefer to invest that wealth as a means to accumulate more and spend more. That is true regardless of whether or not we need more—a notion that has become rather quaint, since we now take for granted that one can never have too much money. This way of thinking is uncommon, however, in societies, including many Buddhist ones, where advertising has not yet conditioned people into believing that happiness is something you can purchase.

In order for capitalism to successfully globalize, such traditional thinking becomes problematic. To facilitate access to resources and markets, a "money culture" is necessary that emphasizes income and expenditure. But is it a form of cultural imperialism to assume that we in the "developed" world who take such a money culture for granted know more about worldly well-being than "undeveloped" societies do? Our obsession with economic growth seems

natural to us because we have forgotten the historicity of many of the “needs” we now take for granted, and we are therefore blind to: the importance of self-limitation, which requires some degree of nonattachment from things and therefore from the markets that buy and sell them.

All this is expressed better with a traditional Buddhist analogy. The world is full of thorns and sharp stones (and now broken glass and other human refuse too); what should we do about this? One solution, at least in principle, is to pave over the entire earth, but a simpler alternative is to wear shoes.⁴¹ “Paving the whole planet” seems a good metaphor for our collective economic globalization project. Without the wisdom of self-limitation, we may not be satisfied even when we have used up all the earth’s resources. The other solution is for our minds to learn how to “wear shoes,” so that our collective ends become an expression of the renewable means that the biosphere provides.

Why do we assume that lack of money and a restricted range of consumer goods must be *dukkha*? Perhaps that brings us to the heart of the matter. Has material wealth become increasingly important in the “developed” world because of our eroding faith in any other possibility of salvation? Has increasing our “standard of living” become so compulsive because it substitutes for the sense of security once provided by traditional religious values?

From that perspective, our evangelical efforts to economically “develop” other societies, which cherish their own spiritual values and community traditions, may be viewed as a contemporary form of religious imperialism. Does that make the globalization of capitalism a new kind of mission to convert the heathen?

Ill will / Compassion

Ending our *dukkha* is the problem that Buddhism addresses, and the major way that Buddhism addresses it is with compassion. That is because our compassion not only increases the happiness of others who receive it, it also increases our own. “For if it is correct,” as the Dalai Lama tells us, “that those qualities such as love, patience, tolerance, and forgiveness are what happiness consists in, and if it is correct that compassion is both the source and fruit of these qualities, then the more we are compassionate, the more we provide for our own happiness.”⁴²

In order to determine the ethical value of an action, Tibetan Buddhism considers its utilitarian consequences less important than the individual’s *kun long*, his or her “overall state of heart and mind.” Ethically wholesome actions

arise naturally when our *kun long* is basically compassionate. “Compassion—which entails ethical conduct—belongs at the heart of all our actions, both individual and social.”⁴³ Insofar as the ultimate goal of economic growth is increasing the sum of human happiness, this key Buddhist insight leads to a crucial question: How much does global capitalism encourage compassion (for example, by increasing opportunities to help people), and how much does it discourage the development of compassion (by emphasizing individual self-interest)?

Conventional economic theory assumes that material resources are limited while our desires are infinitely expandable. Without the norm of self-limitation, this situation becomes a formula for strife. The three poisons do not work independently; greed, ill will, and delusion interact. In 2002, we saw the collapse of the Enron and WorldCom Corporations, the largest bankruptcies in U.S. history. One of the many reasons their collapse is so controversial is the way Enron’s top management provided golden parachutes for themselves while allowing the pension funds of ordinary employees to become worthless. This may be an extreme example of how greed works against compassion, yet that sort of story is all too familiar, because it regularly recurs.

As we also know, desire frustrated is a major cause—perhaps the major cause?—of ill will. The Buddha warned against negative feelings such as envy (when we have no opportunity to acquire possessions available to others) and avarice (the selfish enjoyment of goods while greedily guarding them from others). A society in which such psychological tendencies predominate may be materially wealthy but is spiritually poor. A society where people do not feel that they benefit from sharing with each other has already begun to break down.

Delusion / Wisdom

For its proponents, the globalization of market capitalism is a victory for “free trade” over the inefficiency of protectionism and the corruption of special interests. Free trade and capital movement seem to realize in the economic sphere the supreme value that we place on freedom. Freedom optimizes access to resources and markets. What could be wrong with that?

Approaching the issue from a non-Western perspective such as Buddhism makes it easier to see that globalizing capitalism is neither natural nor inevitable. It is one historically conditioned way for us to understand and

organize our material world, with disadvantages as well as advantages, since it is based upon certain presuppositions about the nature of that world.

The critical stage in the development of market capitalism occurred during the Industrial Revolution, when new technologies led to the "liberation" of a critical mass of land, labor, and capital, which became understood in a new way: as commodities to be bought and sold. In order for market forces to interact freely and productively, the world had to be converted into extractable resources available for exchange. As Karl Polanyi has shown, there was nothing inevitable about this commodification.⁴⁴ In fact, it was disliked and resisted by many people at the time, and was successfully implemented only because of strong government support.

For those who had capital to invest, the Industrial Revolution was quite profitable, yet that was not the way most people experienced market commodification. The biosphere (which from an ecological perspective could be considered our mother as well as our home) became commodified into a collection of resources to be exploited. Human life became commodified into labor, or work-time, and priced according to supply and demand. Family patrimony, the traditional inheritance preserved for one's descendants, became commodified into capital for investment. All three were reduced to *means* that the new economy used to generate more capital for more development for more profit—yielding more capital for more development for more...

From a religious perspective, an alternative way to describe this process of commodification is that the world and its many beings (including humans) have become de-sacralized. Today we see biotechnology doing this to the genetic code of life; soon our awe at the mysteries of reproduction—one of the last bastions of the sacred—will be replaced by the ultimate shopping experience. The "developed world" is now largely secularized, yet elsewhere this social and economic transformation is far from finished. Is that why the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization have become so important? A less sanguine way of viewing their role is that they exist to ensure that nothing stands in the way of converting the rest of the earth—the still "undeveloped world," to use our revealing term for it—into resources and markets.

This commodified understanding presupposes a sharp duality between humans and the rest of the earth. Value is created by our goals and desires; the rest of the world has no meaning or value except insofar as it serves human purposes. However natural this dualistic understanding now seems to us,

Buddhist teachings question it, for it is one of our more problematic delusions, at the heart of our dukkha.

There are different accounts of what Buddha experienced when he became enlightened, but they agree that he realized the nondual interdependence of things. The world is not a collection of things but a web of interacting processes. Nothing has any reality of its own apart from that web, because everything, including us, is dependent on everything else. As the Dalai Lama puts it, "When we consider the matter, we start to see that we cannot finally separate out any phenomena from the context of other phenomena."⁴⁵ The Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh has expressed this more poetically:

If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow, and without trees we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either....

If we look into this sheet of paper even more deeply, we can see the sunshine in it. If the sunshine is not there, the tree cannot grow. In fact, nothing can grow. Even we cannot grow without sunshine. And so, we know that the sunshine is also in this sheet of paper. The paper and the sunshine *inter-are*. And if we continue to look, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. And we see the wheat. We know that the logger cannot exist without his daily bread, and therefore the wheat that became his bread is also in this sheet of paper. And the logger's father and mother are in it too.⁴⁶

He goes on to show that "as thin as this sheet of paper is, it contains everything in the universe in it." Such interdependence challenges our usual sense of separation from the world. The Cartesian sense that I am "in here," inside my head behind my eyes, and the world is "out there," alienates us from the world we are "in." The anatta "no-self" teaching denies this duality, which for Buddhism is seen as psychologically and historically conditioned. Our sense of a self apart from the world is a delusion—what would now be called a construction—because the sense of "I" is an effect of interacting physical and mental processes that are interdependent with the rest of the world. This makes each of us a manifestation of the world. The Buddhist path works by helping us to realize our interdependence and nonduality with the rest of the

biosphere, and to live in accordance with that. This path is incompatible, therefore, with any economic system that treats the earth only as a commodity, or that works to reinforce our delusive sense of separation from it and from other people.

TRANSFORMING THE SYSTEM

Does the above critique—my extrapolation of basic Buddhist teachings—imply that Buddhism is incompatible with capitalism? The nature and role of corporations is addressed in more detail in the next chapter, which points to some other fundamental problems with these organizations. Yet such extrapolations of Buddhist teachings must be kept in context. To say it again, Buddhism does not itself advocate any particular economic system, and neither does it *prima facie* reject any. Historically, Buddhism has been quite pragmatic and flexible regarding such institutions. Furthermore, this would seem to be an area where the Buddhist tradition has something to learn from modern economics, insofar as its central concern is eliminating dukkha and promoting human happiness. Buddhism arose and developed in cultures where technologies were comparatively primitive, and where the economic opportunities to improve one's lot were usually very limited. Traditionally, Buddhism has focused on mental dukkha—the unhappiness caused by our ways of thinking and feeling—but physical dukkha is also dukkha that needs to be addressed. Despite all the problems with modern technologies and economic globalization, contemporary Buddhism needs to acknowledge the opportunities they can offer for promoting individual and social happiness. Generally, though, that is not a point that needs to be stressed today; rather, there is greater need for the Buddhist insight that economics and technology cannot by themselves resolve our dukkha.

The crucial issue remains the relationship between an economic system and the individual and social values it promotes: in other words, how responsible capitalism is or can become. Many critics emphasize the importance of governments in their supervisory and regulatory role, which is indeed necessary, yet that also highlights the worrisome tendency of some capitalist institutions, especially powerful corporations, to subvert such regulation. The U.S. electoral process is an egregious example, but there are many others. The fact that this subversion is now so obvious also suggests the possibility of a solution, at least in democratic societies.

People create the social system, but the system creates people. This sociological truism implies that we need to work on both levels. Naturally, the main focus of Buddhism has been, and will continue to be, on personal transformation. Yet it is not enough to assume that, if only enough people change themselves the system must and will change to accommodate them. The social forces that mold the ways we think, feel, and act today—especially the state and the mass media, both largely corporate controlled—are so powerful that they cannot just be ignored, as we try to construct a more generous, compassionate, and wise society within the shell of institutionalized greed, ill will, and delusion. In order for the necessary changes to occur, we must take advantage of our relatively democratic institutions to challenge those institutions.

If it is agreed that responsible capitalism is not an end in itself but a means toward a better life and a healthier society, it becomes difficult to avoid the conclusion that today we need more democratic supervision of international markets, which need to become more transparent in their operations. If it is also true that societies do not exist for the sake of markets but vice versa, it is also true that during the last two hundred years the tail has often wagged the dog. Many, perhaps most, people have had to adapt to economic changes that were forced upon them by undemocratic (or only nominally democratic) rulers. If global capitalism is to become truly socially responsible, such forced transformations must be recognized as unacceptable. How can more democratic decision making be encouraged? In two general ways:

Change from the top down. Perhaps the most pressing immediate issue is the public supervision of privately owned corporations, especially transnational ones responsible for an increasing share of the world's economic product. I think that the first concern should be to reduce their influence on public institutions, especially to protect the electoral process from the effects of their "contributions," and to address the role of corporate lobbyists. Another step is to require the boards of large corporations to include employee and environmentalist representatives, to ensure that profit is not the only factor considered in decision making. In the end, I think it will be necessary to redefine the nature of corporations by means of their social umbilical cords: that is, by rewriting their corporate charters to ensure that corporations exist to promote the public good rather than vice versa. Until the late nineteenth century, corporations were usually more closely scrutinized and supervised by state governments, and the penalty of institutional death—revoking charters—

was sometimes applied to those that engaged in illegal activities or otherwise seriously violated the conditions of their charters.

I do not underestimate the difficulty of doing these things, but I also doubt whether our present economic system can ever become truly responsible without such measures.

Change from the bottom up. To start at the bottom is to begin with people's basic values, including religious commitments. Buddhist values, like other Buddhist teachings, are not revealed to us but discovered by those who follow the Buddhist path. Shakyamuni Buddha is not a god; through his own efforts he discovered the nature of reality, the Dharma, and by following in his footsteps we can discover those same truths for ourselves. Buddhist precepts are not moral laws that someone or something else obligates us to follow. Rather, the incentive is that if we live according to them, our karma will improve and our lives will naturally become more happy. This does not require anyone to identify himself or herself as a Buddhist, but it does require our own effort to transform ourselves.

Such a transformation may be in accord with a general spiritual shift in contemporary societies, where fewer people are inclined to identify themselves with religious institutions, yet more people say they are interested in the spiritual dimension of their lives. That can be dismissed as another example of our more self-centered individualism, but I think it is much more than that. Other complementary movements, such as "downshifting" and voluntary simplicity, suggest a change of mood among some in the more affluent nations. It is difficult to determine how widespread this change is—corporate media, dependent on advertising revenues (and thus promoting consumerism), have little incentive to spotlight it—but if this grows into a genuine social movement, it might become the most important example of a bottom-up route to upgrading our collective moral behavior by first upgrading our collective spiritual consciousness.

I emphasize this because from a Buddhist viewpoint, and perhaps from any truly religious viewpoint, the most problematic aspect of capitalism today is its tendency to function as a religious surrogate. If religion teaches us what is really important about the world, and therefore how to live in it, today the most important religion for an increasing number of people all over the world is consumerism. Overproduction has long since shifted the focus from the manufacture of goods to the manufacture of demand—one of the more

trenchant examples of how capitalism has remolded society in order to solve its own problems.

How might an "upgraded" spiritual consciousness express itself economically? One possibility is an expanded role for churches and religious (or religious-inspired) NGOs such as charities and pressure groups, which can employ their own economic power as well as the oxygen of publicity to influence the values of global capitalist development. Economic boycotts played an important role in hastening the end of apartheid in South Africa.

Since governments are also deeply implicated in the new "religion of the market"—measuring their success by the GNP—grassroots efforts are also indispensable for influencing the political process. One way to start would be with a movement to restrict the role of advertising, on the grounds that today much of it has become as bad for our psychological and spiritual health as tobacco is for our physical health.

Such a grassroots transformation in consciousness would doubtless empower many such reforms, in the end either making global capitalism much more responsible or, if that fails, working to replace it with something else more responsible to our spiritual concerns.