

## Poverty Alleviation: A Buddhist Perspective

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Poverty cries out for attention, so powerfully and so insistently, that to ignore it would seem unthinkable. And indeed, poverty alleviation figures prominently on virtually every governmental, non-governmental, and inter-governmental agenda. But in spite of this, poverty persists, and, depending on which measures are used, can be documented as both spreading and deepening.

The generic answer to the problem of poverty has been development. Although its broadest connotation is simply that of expanding or realizing potential, development has over the past half century come to mean primarily the expansion of economic potential and secondarily the realization of social, cultural, and political potentials. But after five decades of steady, and at times extremely rapid, growth of economic activity and development initiatives, poverty has not been eliminated and the degree to which it has been alleviated in global terms is very much open to contest.

For example, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) estimated in its 2000 Global Development Report that 2.8 billion people now live on less than \$2 per day—a level of income that is marginally adequate for meeting basic subsistence levels of nutrition, clothing, shelter, medical care, and education. Roughly 1.2 billion live at less than \$1 per day—an income level that is generally used to benchmark “absolute poverty.” These figures are distressing: roughly 45% of the global population is barely able to meet its basic subsistence needs; roughly 20% live in such abject conditions that they have no possibility of living minimally dignified lives. But the global situation may, in actuality, be much more dire. Statistics like those just cited can misleadingly suggest that

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poverty has been effectively eliminated in developed countries and that great progress has been made in rapidly developing countries like China where the percentage of the population living on less than \$1 per day has dropped from roughly 45% to less than 16% over the past thirty years. According to US Census Bureau estimates, however, roughly 20% of all American children and 13% of the general population live in poverty. And perhaps more tellingly, 35% of the population will drop below the poverty line for some period of time in the course of any given year—an indication of the precarious nature of basic economic security in what is broadly regarded as the most wealthy country in the world.

The light shed by such statistics on the correlation between economic development and poverty alleviation has been interpreted in a variety of ways. But what they make undeniably manifest is the fact that economic development does not, in and of itself, lead to the alleviation of poverty. On the contrary, even where economic growth and development has been most successfully valorized—as in the U.S.—poverty can actually deepen. What is less clear is what would happen if poverty alleviation, not economic growth and development, were made primary. That is, would poverty alleviation, skillfully enough understood and practiced, be capable of promoting sustained economic growth and development? It is my own conviction that it would, but in ways that would fundamentally reshape and redirect global patterns of social, economic, and political interdependence.

I want to suggest that poverty alleviation is crucial to any truly sustainable development process and, in fact, is an eminently effective and efficient driver of any such process. In contrast, any development process that does not actually alleviate poverty will tend to accommodate and eventually institutionalize it, effectively making more and more room for the poor as the benefits of economic expansion flow decisively elsewhere. In making a case for such an understanding of the relationship between poverty alleviation and development, I will draw on resources from Buddhist thought and practice,

particularly in identifying the meaning and conditioned origination of poverty.

### **Buddhism and Poverty**

It is a basic teaching of Buddhism that, for the purpose of ending or resolving suffering, all things should be seen as having no-self or essential nature. Put somewhat differently, no thing should be seen as literally existing or “standing apart” from all other things in self-sustained independence. On the contrary, all things should be seen as arising interdependently (*pratitya-samutpada*) and as ultimately empty (*sunya*) of any permanently abiding essence.

Poverty, then, does not truly exist. It is not an independent existent and is neither self-originating nor self-sustaining. Rather, poverty obtains because of a particular confluence of conditions, a particular pattern of relationships that emerges and is sustained over time. Given their most robust readings, the teachings of interdependence and emptiness direct us toward seeing that this pattern of relationships is not ultimately divorced from the patterns of relationship through which each of us has come to be both who and as we are. There is ultimately no dividing line, no ontological break, between the pattern of relationships that are constitutive of poverty and those that are constitutive of each and every one of us. In short, we cannot divorce ourselves completely from the conditions that give rise to poverty. In some degree, we are intimate with the poor and their suffering. If we believe otherwise, that can only be a function of our own ignorance of the horizonless interdependence that obtains among all things. This ignorance is itself a primary condition for suffering.

In the *Ina Sutta* (*Anguttara Nikaya* VI.45), the Buddha stated that, “poverty is suffering.” Indeed, poverty is suffering of a particularly egregious sort. The first part of the sutta details the consequences that ensue from material poverty: debt, interest payments, being hounded when falling arrears, and bondage. Falling into poverty means losing the ability to meet

one's own needs. If this condition persists, one is subject to a pattern of dependence on others that is associated with shouldering burdens in excess of meeting one's own needs and, finally, with punishing isolation from others. Unalleviated, poverty results in being deprived of even the most basic freedoms.

In the second part of the sutta, the Buddha poses an analogy that makes it clear that poverty is not solely or even most crucially about material deprivation. "In the same way, monks, whoever has no conviction with regard to skillful mental qualities, no sense of conscience with regard to skillful mental qualities, no sense of concern...persistence...[or] discernment with regard to skillful mental qualities is...said to be poor, destitute, and without means." (*Anguttara Nikaya*, VI.47) There are at least two important implications of this passage. First, it draws an analogy between the debts, interest payments, hounding, and bondage that result from material poverty and the full range of compounding and ultimately freedom-curtailling experiential outcomes associated with unskillful qualities of attention. Most simply put, ignorance begets suffering. But in addition, the passage also suggests that in the broadest, and finally, most important terms, all poverty can be traced to unskillful (*akusala*) patterns of awareness. In short, poverty is ultimately rooted in deficient and/or misdirected patterns of attention, both resulting from and resulting in ignorance and unskilled qualities of relationship.

The *Ina Sutta* thus depicts material deprivation as less a cause of conflicted patterns of interdependence than as a particular result of them. The terms for poverty and the poor most commonly used in the Pali canon—*daliddata* and *dalidda*—are very telling in this regard. Conceptually, these terms center on vagrancy and begging. They point to such severe breakdowns of normal patterns of social and economic interdependence that one no longer has either a place to call one's own or any means of meeting the most basic requirements for food, shelter, and clothing. At the same time,

the early canon endorses in the most positive terms possible the benefits of the homeless life of the monk or nun in which one's basic subsistence needs are met through ritualized seeking of alms. It is not the mere fact of material lack that determines if a person is poor or living in poverty, but rather how he or she experiences this lack—as being left wanting or with contentment. The facts of a situation are less crucial than its meaning.

This reading of poverty is given broad support in the positive virtues that are associated with the “homelessness” of monastic life. The early canon is replete with passages extolling the simple life of absolutely minimal material possessions and few wants—a life that is explicitly ordained for members of the Sangha and which is *appicchata* or “content with little.” In keeping with this implicit valorization of ‘poverty’, texts like the *Rattaphala Sutta* renounce material wealth and the complicated patterns of desire associated with it, while holding in highest esteem “noble wealth” (*ariya dhana*) that is centered on building up faith (*saddha*), moral clarity (*sila*), and wisdom (*panna*) and is conducive to sustained Buddhist practice and the realization of freedom from suffering.

The rhetorical strategy of critically inverting the meaning and valorization of poverty and wealth to foster appropriate practice reflects the Buddha's commitment to making the fullest possible use of situational resources in his teaching. For instance, when teaching members of the brahmin caste, the Buddha similarly reframed the meanings of “brahmin” and “sacrifice” in order to turn this audience away from troubling patterns of relationship and identity. Using as points of departure familiar elements of their own lives—elements that presently commit them to cycling in samsara—the Buddha would skillfully guide his brahmin audience toward moving in the direction of nirvana. Beginning with what is intimately apparent—the situation of a particular audience, as it has come to be (*yathabhutam*)—the Buddha discloses how *this* place, *this* situation, can be understood as

already part of the noble Path itself. In these cases, as in similar teachings on matters ranging from the personal to the political, the Buddha's aim is to enjoin others to vigilantly reorient existing relational patterns, effectively revising their dramatic disposition or meaning to incorporate them into Buddhist practice. Such teachings are, in other words, object lessons in how to work *with* karma—that is, with outcomes and opportunities conditioned by abiding patterns of value-intention-action—to achieve enlightening ends.

It would be inappropriate, then, to make too much out of the different valence given to poverty and wealth in different canonical contexts or to insist upon reconciling them entirely. The teachings recorded in (especially) the early canon do not provide strict definitions, but rather injunctions and directions for practice. Their primary function is to encourage and direct the systematic conversion of the meaning of our situation from samsara to nirvana, from want to contentment, from bondage to liberation. This said, however, the canon does offer sufficient resources to construct an understanding of poverty and its alleviation that is clear, sustainable, and karmically astute. Two texts from the early canon are of particular help in this regard: the *Sakkapanha Sutta* and the *Cakkavatti-Sihanda Sutta*.

The *Sakkapanha Sutta* gets to the heart of the development dilemma—the fact that good intentions often (and quite ironically) seem to result in ill effects. The sutta centers on a discussion between Sakka, the ruler of the gods, and the Buddha. As a ruler of the gods, Sakka is in a particularly good position to observe that, even when people wish to live in peace, without hate, hostility, or malignity, they are seldom able to do so for long. In spite of their good will and intentions, conflicts arise, hate and hostility come into play, and trouble and suffering continue unabated and are even exacerbated. In response to Sakka's question about why this is so, the Buddha lays out a sequence of conditions upon which such unfortunate turns of events pivot. The most readily apparent condition is the persistence of jealousy and greed, which

depends upon the persistence of fixed likes and dislikes, which are rooted in craving desires, which are fed by dwelling upon or thinking continuously about things. This tendency to dwell on things is itself a function of mentally proliferating impediments (*papanca*). The key to living in sustained peace, “realizing final nirvana...blazing a trail, exhausting samsara, passing by all suffering...” is nothing other than “cutting through *papanca*.” (*DN* 14.3.33)

Sakka naturally asks how it is that the tendency for proliferating impediments can be undermined or ended. The answer provided by the Buddha is both marvelously direct and subtle. He takes as cases in point immediate experiences of pleasure (*somanassa*), displeasure (*domanassa*), and equanimity (*upekkha*). There are, he says, two basic ways in which each of these can play out—two distinctive directions in which pleasure, displeasure and equanimity can dispose our immediate situation and about which we should be vigorously mindful. One way is toward increasing unwholesome eventualities (*akusala dhamma*) and decreasing wholesome eventualities (*kusala dhamma*). The other is toward decreasing eventualities that are unwholesome and increasing those that are wholesome. It is in the latter case that pleasure, displeasure, and equanimity can be deemed excellent and *papanca* fails to arise. That is, the proliferation of situational blockages does not occur so long as things are headed in a wholesome direction, proceeding in a wholesome manner, in such a way that unwholesome factors decrease.

Crucially, the Buddha does not indicate that the rise of wholesome (*kusala*) factors is itself enough. Rather, the decrease of unwholesome (*akusala*) factors is also necessary. In terms of the present discussion, this cautions that while economic growth and development might be “positive” in and of themselves, poverty may not be eliminated by these alone. Alleviating poverty must, at the very least, be vigorously complicated with development. Moreover, mindfulness with respect to what factors or eventualities arise from any given confluence of conditions or relational dynamics must be

continuous and unwavering.

The relational and attentive quality being referenced is simply and effectively indicated through the use of the adjectives *kusala* and *akusala*. As used in Buddhist discourse, the connotations of *kusala* and *akusala* significantly exceed that suggested by their common translation as “wholesome” and “unwholesome.” *Kusala* refers to qualities of action and engagement that are skillful to an exemplary degree. It does not mean being “good enough,” but rather good to a virtuosic or expert degree—so profoundly appreciating a particular field of endeavor and the unique complexion of a given situation that there obtain no impediments to enhancing the situation through what appear to be effortless contributions. In the *Sakkapanha Sutta*, it is stated that to the extent that pursuit of pleasure, displeasure and equanimity is conducive to turns of events that are *kusala* and that decrease propensities that are *akusala*, they should be sought after; if not, such pursuit should be abandoned. Elsewhere in the canon, similar claims are made with respect, for example, to bodily comportment and reasoning. This, the Buddha informs Sakka, is the practice by means of which *papanca* is ended and the way of buddhas firmly taken.

There is significant convergence between the claim made in the *Sakkapanha Sutta* that situational blockages, trouble, and suffering derive from allowing things to turn in an *akusala* fashion and the declaration in the *Ina Sutta* that poverty occurs with *akusala* patterns of attention and relationship. This suggests seeing poverty itself in terms of situational blockages or the proliferation of impediments to relating freely. *Poverty is an erosion of the attentive and situational resources needed, in any given situation, to orient it as a whole toward the resolution of suffering.* Poverty is thus rooted in the *asravas* or out-flows which drain away attention-energy into polluting or wasteful activities, the elimination of which the early canon repeatedly identifies with the attainment of ultimate freedom as a realized arhant.



Such a reading of poverty is consonant with much of the imagery of Mahayana Buddhist teachings on bodhisattvas and buddha-realms, as well as with Mahayana emphases on skillful means (*upaya*), the perfection of offering (*dana*), and realizing the emptiness or mutual relevance of all things. But it is also deeply embedded in the early canon's explicitly critical engagement of issues surrounding governance and right rule—a context that itself points to the meaning of sustained consonance between practice and polity, between Dharma and the institutions of daily life. In the *Agganna Sutta* (*Digha Nikaya* 27), for example, there is recounted a narrative of human and worldly origins in which it is made quite clear that there is no essential good to be found in currently prevailing social, political, or economic institutions. All such structures resulted from originally *akusala* patterns of value-intention-action—that is, from karma which resulted in ways of being present that were habitually and profoundly prone to trouble or suffering. As such, they are open to critique to the precise extent that they institutionalize rather than disestablish *akusala* dispositions—dispositions that compound rather than finally and meaningfully resolve suffering. Nowhere in the early canon, however, is the dynamic interplay among karma, institutions, and policies for governance and development more clearly illustrated than in the core story of the *Cakkavatti-Sihanda Sutta* (*Digha Nikaya* 26).

The sutta opens with the Buddha addressing a group of monks, exhorting them to practice mindfulness with respect to body, feelings, mind, and mental objects, in this way insuring the building of wholesome conditions and merit. In keeping with the teaching strategy outlined above of working with situationally relevant resources, the sutta ends with the Buddha detailing what is meant, for monks and nuns, by such mundane values as “length of life,” “beauty,” “happiness,” “wealth,” and “power.” Within this narrative frame, the Buddha relates an historically and karmically sweeping tale that explicitly addresses the meaning of sound governance and that pointedly lays bare the root conditions

and ultimate consequences of poverty.

This inner tale begins during the reign of King Dalhanemi, a wheel-turning king ruling in accordance with Dharma and in whose kingdom all beings live cooperatively, attractive in appearance, long in life, and refined in customs and tastes. The story chronicles, over eight “generations”, the gradual slide of this idyllic world into increasing trouble and suffering, reaching a nadir when society collapses into a degenerate free-for-all in which children curse their parents, respect is ridiculed, family members murder one another as readily as they do strangers, and in which addictions to crude sensations and abusive relationships become celebrated as norms. With each step into this moral abyss, the vitality and beauty of the people decreases, going from a lifetime of 80,000 years in the time of King Dalhanemi to a mere seven years.

This fall begins with a governance and policy failure on the part of Dalhanemi's heir seventh removed: he makes the mistake of not fully consulting with his ministers and advisors and acting on his own thinking alone. In particular, he fails to properly respond to evidence of poverty in the capital city. A well-intended series of responses ensues, each bringing about greater and greater trouble. The more he tries to control the behavior of the people, the further things spiral out of control instead. For example, after he has (inadvertently) allowed poverty to rise to the point that theft occurs, he decides to give money to the thief so that he can support his family without crime. But when people hear of this, they interpret it as meaning that theft is rewarded with money from the king! So theft rises. The king then decides to behead a thief as a warning to all who would steal. But people see this use of a well-honed sword and get the idea that if they kill the people from whom they steal, no one will be able to report their crime! From here, things go steadily from bad to worse with each attempt to rein in the unwholesome behavior of the people.

This trend only turns around when a few people refuse to endorse or participate in what have become the “norms,” “institutions,” and “ideals” of society. Retreating from a society that they see as imploding—further membership in which would only embroil them in evidently unwholesome karma—they eventually recognize one another as of like heart and mind, forming a community of their own based on the shared practice of good deeds for the sake of other beings and centered on coursing freely along the four immeasurable relational headings (*brahma-vihara*) of loving-kindness, compassion, joy in the good fortune of others, and equanimity. Their efforts consolidate and the negative spiral of social, political, economic and cultural degeneration is reversed. After twelve generations or periods in which increasingly wholesome values-intentions-actions prevail, the realm is blessed with the arising of the fully enlightened Buddha Metteyya (Maitreya).

There are three very interesting themes in this apparently simple moral tale. First is the crucial role of poverty in bringing about social collapse and the identification of poverty with the breakdown of contribution-mediated mutual relevance. That is, poverty and the potential for social collapse arise when people are not in position to contribute to the welfare of others or to be appreciated and contributed to in turn. Second is the correlation among decreasing vitality and lifespan, increasing ignorance about our interdependence, and the collapse of the life of the community to which it leads. In remarkably simple language, this points toward meaningful interrelationships among the loss of personal and cultural memory and history, the loss of a capacity for concerted attention and long-term commitments, and dramatic or moral distraction. Finally, the story makes it very clear that the strategy of securing ourselves against trouble and crisis through institutions of control eventually becomes self-defeating, crossing the threshold of its own utility to establish conditions in which further controls become increasingly imperative. In a society that has suffered the total social, economic, and political collapse that ensues when

poverty is not truly and sustainably alleviated and then eliminated, the ultimate corrective does not lie in increasing capacities for control and autonomy, but in systematically cultivating the conditions of appreciative and contributory virtuosity.

According to the framed narrative, poverty manifests when people are not able to work in and contribute to their community in a meaningful way. At a deeper level, however, this also means that the community at large is incapable of properly appreciating the resources—the distinctive difference—of precisely these people. The poor are people who cannot make a meaningful and valued difference. Poverty, then, consists of contributory impasse and implies a failure to appreciate—that is, to sympathetically understand and add value to—our ongoing patterns of interdependence. The breakdown of appreciative and contributory mutuality is a relational breakdown, a function of disrupted or disoriented interdependence.

As the sutta makes clear, both felt community and its objective expression in abiding social institutions are compromised when interdependence devolves into ignorance-conditioned patterns of dependence and independence, and they disintegrate with the breakdown of robust patterns of mutual contribution. Resisting or reversing such devolution and disintegration cannot hinge on simply meeting individual (or even collective) needs or wants; success finally hinges on *how* these are addressed—that is, on the values underlying our strategies for redressing the erosion of relational capacity and effective offering. Successfully alleviating poverty is a function of realizing and sustaining patterns of interdependence that enhance the capabilities of both individuals and communities for relating freely in contributing to one another's welfare. True poverty alleviation at once results from and results in bodhisattva action.

The strategic implications of this are expressed in the narrative climax of the *Cakkavatti-Sihanda Sutta*. Poverty,

and the kinds of social malaise that are at once primary evidence and consequences of it, is not best alleviated through either state welfare or legal and technological controls that address only “the poor.” Such efforts eventually only exacerbate the root conditions of poverty. They effectively deny the *relational locus* of poverty, identifying poverty with the poor rather than with a breakdown of full and liberating mutuality. Sustainable poverty alleviation entails fostering increased capacities for—and commitments to—giving appropriately to others, building up the personal and communal resources needed for relating freely, in the context of realizing the horizonless emptiness or mutual relevance of all members of the community or society.

Taken together, these insights drawn from the early Buddhist canon suggest at least superficial compatibility between Buddhist understandings of awakening and social prosperity, and currently predominant growth-oriented, free-market models of development. There is, for example, substantial resonance between the Buddhist focus on alleviating poverty by enhancing appreciative and contributory virtuosity and Nobel laureate Amartya Sen’s definition of “development as freedom” or increased relational capacity. Buddhism, however, is unique in focusing on poverty and its alleviation in terms of karma or value- and intention-conditioned relational dynamics. Because of its irreducibly relational focus, Buddhist approaches to addressing poverty are ultimately systemic in scope. That is, they involve paradigmatic critique of existing practices and institutions—a critique of their root values and assumptions.

### **Trade, Development, and the Erosion of Productive Diversity**

I would like to offer one take on the significance of this difference by looking at the karmic implications of the relationship among trade, development, and productive diversity.

In keeping with the teaching of karma, we might begin assessing the poverty alleviation potential of trade—as it is

now predominantly carried out by especially developed nations and multinational corporations—through considering the dramatic implications of their root motive: increasing material wealth through expanding market share and accelerating profit. Given relatively free reign, to what kinds of situational dynamics—what patterns of relational tension and release—do market-domination and profit-seeking lead? Patterns of relationship aimed at amassing material wealth—rather than, for instance, generating noble wealth or alleviating poverty—are not likely to be conducive to equitably enhanced relational or contributory capacity. On the contrary, they will tend to create and then institutionalize sharply inclined slopes of competitive advantage that preference corporate interests at market expense. Simply put, evenly distributing profits is not as profitable as establishing a market topography that permits and promotes inequitable distribution. Moreover, market-domination—a primary means to this end—is similarly likely to streamline and concentrate production practices in ways that are at once efficient and toxic for both natural ecosystems and self-sustaining, local production regimes.

As demonstrated, for example, in the era of European colonial expansion and in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century emergence of massive industrial monopolies in the U.S., the natural outcome of this process of controlling the topography of advantage (and trade) is a remarkable concentration of power in very few hands. And this is by no means a now defunct historical trend. Globally, the kind of economic interdependence that, over the last quarter century, has resulted from intensive waves of market integration is clearly characterized by a widening gap between rich and poor, with roughly 80% of global resources and wealth being controlled by and benefiting less than 20% of the world's population. At least at the levels of national, regional, and global economies for which there is significant comparative data, currently prevailing patterns of trade promote developmental inequality.

There has been a tendency to view the rise of developmental

inequality as a function of already developed nations taking too little responsibility for ratcheting up the developmental cycle elsewhere and, perhaps, even taking severe advantage of less developed economies. In other words, the tendency has been to call into question the intentions of the developed world and of the multinational corporations to whom disproportionate profit flows through rapidly integrated markets and global patterns of trade. Indeed, there may be cases where major players steering the process of growing global interdependence can rightly be charged with unduly selfish strategies and even morally deficient motives. But because of the wide array of such players and the complexity of national or corporate intentionality, this provides very little critical leverage, despite its rhetorical appeal. An intentional analysis also falls short in not being readily conducive to generating deep and critical historical perspective. The intentions of even close associates are at times difficult to ascertain. Those of actors greatly distant in time or temperament are naturally much more so. Moreover, charges of deficient motives can be dismissed as an inversion of the “ad hominem” argument: they indict those presently benefiting most greatly from prevalent patterns of globalization, rather than the system of values informing and orienting such patterns.

To rephrase this in Buddhist conceptual terms, the karma of presently prevailing patterns of global trade may be deflected in accordance with self-centered or equity-denying intentions held by major economic players: the most highly developed nations and increasingly powerful multinational corporations. But karma is always a complex function of values-intentions-actions. Focusing exclusively on intentions amounts to permitting a critical blindspot—a range of potentially crucial phenomena left entirely out of consideration, especially when the karma in question is not individual, but collective or systemic.

I have argued with respect to technology that such a critical blindspot arises through a confusion of technologies with the

tools to which they give rise, and an inappropriate tendency to evaluate technologies in terms of how well these tools serve us as individuals. In consequence, technologies are effectively exempted from critical attention—that is, the values that technologies embody and render ambient in societies deploying them are critically occluded by the individual uses to which tools are put. And because these tools are designed and redesigned with the overarching mandate of increasing utility and user-friendliness, this leads to blindly endorsing continued technological development and deployment in a particularly vicious form of critical circularity. The effects of technology on the character and direction of relationships (personal, communal, national, international, and global) are functionally ignored.

Similarly, it is particularly dangerous to neglect assessing the values underlying global patterns of trade through assuming their “value-neutrality” and focusing instead on how trade patterns are used by various actors. Indeed, while many economists ostensibly view trade as a technology, they actually treat it as a tool used by individual entrepreneurs, corporations, countries, or regional associations (the EU or ASEAN, for example). Trade is thus assumed to be properly and adequately assessed in terms of how well it meets the individual needs and interests of those engaging in trade. Many economists then stress the fact that although global trade does tend to bring about increased inequality, it also makes *both* the rich *and* the poor richer. From this, they conclude that while the benefits may be greater for some than others, current patterns of global trade are good for each and every one of the world’s people. What they cannot conclude, at the risk of committing the fallacy of composition, is that what is good for each and every one of us, must be good for *all* of us. The effects on a whole may be something entirely other than the sum of effects on all its parts.

Like technologies, presently prevailing patterns of global trade are not value neutral and cannot be accurately or adequately assessed by measuring (even in statistical aggregates) their



impact on individuals as such. Neither can their ill effect of fostering developmental inequality be traced solely back to unjust motives in how they are used. Rather, contemporary patterns of trade can only be critically evaluated by seeing how the constellation of values structuring global trade affect how we relate, as individuals, as countries, and as members of expanding global communities. At the center of this constellation, I would argue, are the related values of control and choice that structure the operation of markets.

Global trade presently apportions unequal benefits to the already developed and advantaged and disproportionately exports the costs of economic growth to those least able to bear these costs. On one hand, this means that the present system of trade fosters a growing “capacity gap” that results in the vast majority of the world’s population being in a relatively poorer and poorer position both to contribute to others and to be contributed to by them. Although they may be better off over time in absolute terms, in *relative* terms they will always be worse off. On the other hand, by bearing the cost burden—for example, in terms of environmental degradation—of benefits they do not receive, it is practically assured that their capability for responding to the challenges of their own situation will prove increasingly inadequate. As it is currently configured, global trade will never bring about true poverty alleviation because poverty is its primary by-product.

This admittedly iconoclastic claim is not in any way a claim about the intentions of those who have initiated and sustained the kinds of global trade we now experience in everyday ways. Neither is it a claim—like that central to Marxist critiques of global capital—that rests upon an assumed historical necessity or developmental teleology. Rather, it is simply a claim about the history of how things have come to be, as they have come to be. It is a claim about how large-scale patterns of relationship are systematically oriented toward the demise of productive diversity through growing trade focused on increasing wealth through market

domination and accelerating profit, making use of technologies biased toward the strategic value of control to promote market freedoms centered on choice. Like the efforts of the hapless king in the *Cakkavatti Sihanda Sutta* who tries to restore social order and prosperity through the increasing exercise of control, the intentions of those promoting more extensive global trade may be quite positive. But the values embedded in their strategies for poverty alleviation—contrary to their explicit intentions—are sending things spiraling further and further away from their ostensive goal. In effect, they are good for economic growth and marketization. But they also make the elimination of poverty impossible.

These “ironic effects” of global trade are in large measure a result of the corrosive effect of dense and extensive market operations on small-scale production ecologies. From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onward, the development of global capitalism and competitive market-driven production has been marked by a decisive shift from local-to-local exchanges to local-global-local transfer currents. Whereas the rate and density of local-to-local trade exchanges turned on naturally variable, vernacular negotiations of needs and values, the velocity of local-global-local transfer currents could be subjected to relatively overt control through price manipulation. In effect, production could be used to drive demand. This enabled global capital to engineer an extremely rapid spread of markets and the conversion of an unprecedented range of goods and services into mass-produced and mass-consumed commodities. The result has been the consolidation of a globally coordinated economic system that is very well suited to meeting individual needs and wants, benefiting some more than others, but clearly benefiting all in easily quantifiable ways.

A significant cost of this consolidation, however, has been the rapid growth of global production monocultures that disrupt and erode local ecologies of production and consumption—those porously bounded domains within which interlocked producers actively and sustainably contribute to one

another's welfare. Locally, this means a loss of the range of productive differences that allow members of a local community to make a difference for one another. In Ivan Illich's terms, this brings about the "institutionalization of entirely new classes of the poor," or what in Buddhist terms could be referred to as the systematic depletion of the appreciative and contributory resources required for sustained bodhisattva action.

It should be stressed that this was not an explicitly intended effect of rapidly consolidating markets and production regimes. Rather, the linking of rapid economic growth with increasing poverty can be traced to values embedded in the technologically triggered efficiencies that dissolved geographic and related temporal constraints on the expansion of markets and that also powerfully affected the content (and karma) of those markets. Global trade ceased being limited to highly durable goods, typically of high unit cost. Trade in luxuries—for example, in silks, spices, and precious metals and stones—continued to be important. But the overall scope of global trade spread to include ever-greater kinds and quantities of non-luxury and subsistence goods. The economic logic is not particularly complicated. Expanding markets require expanding consumer bases—an expansion that can be driven only so far by falling prices associated with efficiencies in production and transportation. Sustained market growth is only possible if the range of goods traded undergoes similar growth. Especially once markets have become global, trade expansion can only be stably realized through increasing trade density.

The growth imperative of heightened trade density has resulted practically in the commodification of all subsistence goods and services, effectively displacing local production regimes and vernacular negotiations of value. Importantly, as the range of goods transferred into a local economy nears the point of natural saturation, meeting all extant needs, further market growth depends on the creation of new needs and desires, and new problems to be solved. This has been

accomplished through aggressive advertising regimes that systematically extend the spectrum of goods perceived as necessary and/or desirable; through the increasingly detailed problematizing of daily life; and through the emergence of industries that commodify an increasingly broad array of previously “non-economic” services. Simply put, the continued increase of market density pivots on creating new kinds and numbers of both problems and wants.

Recommending the expanded and dense markets that result from intensive commodification and advertising are reliability, standardized products and product compatibility, convenience, and heightened possibilities for exercising freedom of choice. The monetary medium of global transfers of goods and services also guarantees that wage-earning employment invariably is fostered by expanding markets. In fact, the transition from barter to cash is crucial to marketization processes. Markets are fueled by consumption and consumption is facilitated by the use of cash and credit. In advanced market economies, then, employment tends to be high and relatively inclusive, at first available and then necessary not only for adult men, but also for women and previously marginalized minority populations.

Greater employment opportunities for all—especially women and minorities—as well as greater access to the goods and services offered by the market, can and have been celebrated as signs of successful development and as key to poverty alleviation. Futures that traditionally have been somewhat narrow in prospect have been manifestly widened. Choices have multiplied. And there is certainly no reasonable argument against this in principle: the professional opportunities now open to women and minorities, for example, mark a real, significant, and entirely welcome enhancement of their possibilities for social contribution.

But focusing on the positive effects on individual members of communities or individual classes is, all the same, to dangerously restrict our ability to evaluate how such changes

affect qualities of relationship more broadly. It is to fail questioning whether we are better or worse off if increasing choice is taken as definitive—both necessary and sufficient—for increasing freedom. Indeed, once the critical bias toward individuals is abandoned, it manifestly follows that if the poor are invariably worse off *in relative terms* as a result of the historical pattern of economic development sketched above, then they are in some significant degree also *relationally disadvantaged*.

It is not just that “old growth” production ecologies are replaced by more efficient systems. Their replacement signifies a loss of overall local productive diversity: the depletion of the personal and community resources required for responding to changing circumstances and meaningfully meeting local needs. People lose the distinctively different positions from which they were able to contribute directly to their own and others’ welfare—a loss of capacities for innovation, for shared improvisation, for on-site learning, and for appreciating (literally adding value to) their situation. The globalization of both production and consumption values and practices brings with it an erosion of the differences that allow people to truly make a difference for one another. This is not—as feared by some early advocates for resisting or reversing globalization—because everyone is made “the same” and differences are completely erased. Rather, it is because the *meaning* of difference is radically altered as diversity is systematically translated into mere variety. Differences remain, but they no longer are relevant in the sense of contributing to making a meaningful difference.

For many, this statement will seem overstated, if not simply false. Although it is easy to idealize village life or pre-industrial Arcadias, these are generally agreed to be just that: idealizations and fictions that bear little resemblance to what were often sordidly narrow ways of life. The Buddha’s own description of his insight into interdependence as like coming across a lost and forgotten city is interesting in its association of urban life with vibrant appreciation of the interdependence

among all beings. There is much to recommend contemporary urban life in terms of creative opportunities and lifestyle innovation, but also in terms of overall material security, longevity, and the availability of specialized expertise.

Yet, as made clear in the chronicle of socio-political collapse and urban decay that lies at the center of the *Cakkavatti-Sihanda Sutta*, there is nothing essentially liberating about urban environments. The fact that they promote specialization and a proliferation of new types of relationships does not mean that they necessarily promote increasing capacities for relating freely or exercising the kind of creativity that is both virtuosic and liberating. Following the analysis forwarded in the *Sakkapanha Sutta*, like pleasure, displeasure and equanimity, freedom can be conducive to either wholesomely virtuosic eventualities or the opposite. At least as understood in Buddhist terms, fully addressing the suffering that arises with poverty requires distinguishing between the disparate karma—the disparate patterns of outcome and opportunity—that result from exercising virtually unlimited freedoms of choice and from contributing freely.

The kind of trade and development now dominant in the world, and which underlie most poverty alleviation strategies, are functionally dependent on institutionalizing and valorizing consumption. Although workers engaged at any given point of the production and marketing process can intellectually or in abstract terms see their efforts as contributing meaningfully to the welfare of those who consume market-delivered commodities, the signal and culminating economic event and the answer to poverty is simply increased consumption. Trade finally signifies only a transfer of possession and the freedom it affords is the freedom of choosing between market-delivered alternatives. While such a freedom may well lead to a decrease of eventualities that are experienced as *akusala* or unwholesome, unskillful, and inexpert, it does *not* lead to the increase of eventualities that exhibit increasingly wholesome and skillful expressions of appreciative and contributory

virtuosity.

This is not primarily a function of deficiencies on the part of workers or consumers, but rather a dynamic necessity of present-day markets, based on the karma they establish through their embedded values. Because of the demands for expanded and increasingly dense markets, global scale trade compresses the utility of consumed goods or services to the smallest unit measure possible. Through the advertised inculcation of desire and through the constriction of the popular imagination, conditions are realized such that individual acts of consumption only fleetingly answer needs. The classic example of this is, of course, the institution of fashion (the history of which long predates the contemporary market, but at vastly restricted scales). Fashion effectively seeks to establish strict temporal, spatial, and cultural limits on product usefulness. But the phenomenon is quite general, and it is finally such compressions of utility that “open” the space required for multiplying choices. As a consequence of this, most goods, once acquired, are used very briefly, if at all. Even goods used frequently are seldom used to the point of being functionally worn out. Obsolescence—real or perceived—is crucial to growing markets. Yet, as markets become increasingly extensive and dense, consumers necessarily begin functioning as producers of waste. Or, more graphically stated, they begin to serve as organs of elimination by means of which the (material and experiential) residue of profit making is summarily disposed.

### **Poverty: The Most Egregious Economic Externality**

This brings us to the crux of why growth driven economic development ironically brings about greater poverty. The imperative of growth driven economic development is to maximally extend and deepen market operations. This is an imperative to commodify as many existing types and patterns of goods and services as possible, but also to create new wants (both desires and perceived needs) and new kinds of problems (open to market solution). Necessarily associated with the ratcheting up of commodity consumption are rising

income and employment levels and general progress in terms of broad human development and security. Material poverty, as measured by low income, lack of access to goods and services, and restricted life and livelihood choices, is clearly mitigated, even if populations at the lower end of the income spectrum are—in relative terms—disproportionately disadvantaged by rapid growth and development.

Also associated, however, with the maximization of market extent and density is a minimizing of the gap between consumption and waste. Starkly stated, the cost of being able to choose among almost infinite arrays of goods and services as a market-enabled consumer is the loss of meaningful opportunities for *appreciation* or *adding value*. This qualitatively affects a wide range of relationships. It means the loss of sustained opportunities for caring-about and caring-for one's situation and those with whom it is shared. It means the loss of opportunities for creative enhancement, or for contribution in more general terms. It also means the loss of opportunity for edifying conduct—for endeavors that add value to oneself or that effectively put one in a more valuable position.

If poverty is understood in Buddhist terms as a chronic condition of contributory impasse rooted in the breakdown of appreciative and contributory mutuality—an occlusion of emptiness or mutual relevance in social, economic, and political terms—then virtually alloying consumption and the production of waste cannot help but generate poverty. It cannot avoid systematically converting diversity into mere variety and eroding our personal and communal capabilities for making meaningful differences to and for one another.

The karmic implications of consumption-to-waste driven production of poverty are most clearly and powerfully illustrated in the dynamics of the attention economy that began consolidating over the past quarter century in post-industrial societies and that is now a global phenomenon. In this still emerging economy, it is no longer material goods,



services, or information/knowledge that are the most basic resource commodities, but attention itself. Lasting goods and services are no longer the focus of production, but rather the production of inherently fleeting meanings. In such an economy, “value-added” signifies nothing more or less than attention captured. As attention is systematically exported from local contexts (family and community, for example), primarily through intensive mass media consumption, it is no longer available for appreciating and contributing to one’s immediate situation. It is, with respect to contributing to the welfare of one’s family, neighborhood, or local community, attention wasted.

In much the same way that the conversion of capital to money allows its maximally fluid distribution, the attention economy effectively converts awareness from a qualitatively complex relationship to a minimally structured—that is, minimally committed—energy source. As the attention economy grows, personal and community capabilities for sustained appreciative and contributory virtuosity diminish. World Health Organization projections of an epidemic increase of depression in developed and developing economies (already rated as the most important factor of morbidity and lowered life quality of women in the developed world) is a particularly chilling commentary on the correlation of prevailing development processes, their social ramifications, and the erosion of meaning-making capability.

The consumption of mass media commodities lies at one end of the spectrum of goods and services afforded by global markets and growth-driven economic development, and exhibits with particular force the ironic effects of market- and growth-driven strategies for poverty alleviation. The range of choices provided by the mass media for directly managing or controlling the content of one’s experience, while not infinite, is practically unlimited. In consequence, acts of mass media consumption have an undeniably high probability of being effective at literally *alleviating* the experience of (especially material) poverty. Such acts manifestly and immediately

make life more *bearable*. And, indeed, this is part of the problem with such acts. They are literally immediate: they absorb attention energy and with minimal opportunity for building relational capacity, convert it to waste. They close the space needed for sustained cultivation of virtuosity. By exporting attention from the locally current contexts in which it could be turned to the cultivation and consolidation of appreciative and contributory resources, mass media consumption establishes conditions that prohibit *eliminating* poverty. As is the case with all patterns of consumption that lead to the contraction of opportunities for adding value to our immediate situation, media consumption institutionalizes conditions under which *bearing poverty will be unavoidable*.

It should be noted that the effects of such patterns of consumption—the karma that they establish—are much more pronounced for the poor than for the rich. This is not only because the poor are circumstantially disposed to pay greater attention to cheap and readily available mass media commodities as a way of managing their experience. For example, the poor are much more likely to avail themselves of fast food and to bear the health and aesthetic costs of doing so. Being poor also means being positioned only to purchase commodities of the sort that immediately decrease in value the moment they are purchased.

This is most obviously true of fast food. Unlike a gourmet meal that might be remembered for a lifetime, spur increased culinary creativity, or open new imaginative vistas, fast food is almost immediately and entirely converted to (low quality) bodily energy and waste products. But the same is true of groceries, clothing, household goods, appliances, and so on. The instant these goods are purchased, they decrease in value—a fact that anyone wishing to sell even a one-day old automobile well understands. The rich, however, are able to *invest*. That is, they are able to purchase goods (for example, works of fine art and jewelry, stocks and bonds, and businesses) and services (for example, elite university educations or life-skills training) that have, at least, the

potential to increase in value over time. The ability to invest is one of the reasons that micro-loans work as well as they do. Micro-loans allow the poor to cut sufficiently through the contributory impasse in which they find themselves to realize real gains in both absolute and relative terms. Whether this investment is carried out wisely or unwisely will, of course, determine the economic outcome. But in terms of immediately broadening or deepening the capacities for relating freely that are *experienced* by the poor, micro-loans are remarkably effective. The experience of Hindu untouchables that have followed the example of B. R. Ambedkar in converting to Buddhism suggests that the removal of conceptual limits to investing in one's own capacity for self-enhancement can be just as, or more, effective in exiting the severest kinds of contributory blockage as micro-loans.

But such approaches will, at best, serve to alleviate the poverty of specific populations or members of populations. Alone, they will not address the total structural conditions that presently insure that while poverty may seem more bearable in relative terms, it will be no less widespread or karmically debilitating. Insofar as such approaches do not address the social, economic, cultural, and political systems that have institutionalized the conditions of poverty, they will not be capable of truly eliminating poverty in the fullest sense. The key to doing so is to take overall patterns and qualities of relationships and the values inflecting them as the basis for evaluating prospects, policies, and practices for poverty elimination. Alleviation, while it may be better than nothing, is by no means good enough.

### **Some Practical Implications**

As evidenced in the cautionary tale embedded in the *Cakkavatti Sihanda Sutta* and in the *Sakkapanha Sutta*, whether a particular strategy or practice for relieving poverty is finally constraining or liberating depends on whether it is directed in alignment with ignorance (*avidya*), fixed habit formations (*samskara*), and craving desires (*tanha*), or with

wisdom (*prajna*), attentive mastery (*samadhi*), and moral clarity (*sila*). Development, in the broadest, Buddhist sense, should consist of movement toward realizing patterns of relationship that serve to bring increased productive diversity—that is, patterns of mutual contribution that appreciate or add value to an irreducibly shared situation. Development is then consonant with, and is deepened through, cultivating wisdom, attentive mastery, and moral clarity.

As stated earlier, such a view of development can be seen as an implication of the traditional Buddhist valorization of bodhisattvas (enlightening beings) and skilled relational attunement (*upaya*). In Chan Buddhist terms, development should bring about increased commitments and capacities for “according with any situation, responding as needed” (Ch.: *sui-shih-ying-yung*). This suggests seeing the path of liberating trade and development as a particular manifestation of the path of realizing the emptiness of all things—that is, realizing the potential of all beings for mutual relevance or meaningful difference. It is a path that can be taken up anywhere and traveled without end. Truly liberating trade and development promote opening ourselves *to* one another in that utterly proximate way needed to truly make a difference *for* one another. They mean committing to extending/enhancing community rather than expanding/deepening markets. They mean achieving high contributory and productive diversity, not high commodity variety and consumption density. Only in this way is it possible for each and every one of us to realize that the very place in which we find ourselves is a place of immeasurable meanings and value. This is the ultimate meaning of fully alleviating or eliminating poverty.

What, however, is the practical relevance of such an extraordinarily ambitious goal? Is it possible to translate the “ultimate meaning” of fully alleviating poverty into policies that will concretely and appropriately transform existing practices and institutions? That such a translation process

should not prove impossible is given indirect warrant by Nagarjuna's assertion that while there is a crucial difference between conventional truth (*lokasamvritisatya*) and ultimate truth (*paramarthatatya*), it is only on the basis of everyday practices (*vyavahara*) that ultimate meaning can be taught (*Mulamadhyamikakarika*, Ch. 24). That is, the ultimate truth or meaning of poverty must be expressible in everyday practices.

A useful general framework for carrying out such a translation can be gleaned from the fourth chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*. Here, there is recounted a story in which a wealthy father skillfully draws his long wayward son back into the family and a position to be able to claim his rightful inheritance. The son has been so long absent and has fallen into such poverty that he no longer recognizes his ancestral home or his father. Homeless and indigent, he first thinks to go begging at an estate that—unknown to him—is actually his own inheritance. But on seeing his father and the work being carried out on the premises, and fearing being drafted into forced labor, he thinks it better to go to the village of the poor and seek work and subsistence there.

Recognizing his son at a glance, but also his son's lack of readiness to return to his rightful place, the father initiates a gradual process of drawing his son out of poverty and back into the family. This process consists of bringing out his son's talents and innate virtues in the context of a scaled series of work activities, with each new activity entailing both greater responsibilities and greater opportunity for building up a sense of valued placement as a contributing member of a complex and thriving business and trade community.

It is an important point of the narrative that the son is poor as a function of his own ignorance. His poverty is a result of not understanding the true nature of his connection with his father—hence his departure from the family as a youth—and of being ignorant of any meaningful connection whatsoever with his family and its estate. In less metaphorical terms,

poverty arises through values-intentions-actions that occlude awareness of the interdependence among all things and that thus inflects interdependence in an akusala or unwholesome manner. But the narrative also makes clear that poverty is not just a result of the values-intentions-actions of the poor. The father, too, has no idea of the whereabouts of his son until he appears, as if by accident. The village of the poor in which the son thinks to take refuge from forced labor for the wealthy—a refuge that he sees as at least guaranteeing his subsistence needs—is clearly a “world apart” from that of his family and its businesses. The ignorance is mutual and the karma for the occurrence of poverty is shared.

The shared karma between those who are poor and those who are wealthy is not limited to the arising of poverty. It also extends to the alleviation or elimination of poverty. The turning point is when the son’s good karmic roots bring him into view of his father who recognizes him instantly, seeing beyond the conditions of poverty masking his son’s true nature or relational capabilities. Poverty arises, takes root, and persists only to the extent that its conditions are ignored by those not yet poor. Poverty does not just happen. It is not a simple function of purely natural conditions like a drought. Poverty is a complexly afflicted quality of life that is always in some degree inflicted. As the *Lotus Sutra* story stresses through the trope of forgotten paternity and as was central to the drama of the *Cakkavatti-Sihanda Sutta*, since the poor are afflicted with poverty only because they are not properly attended by those not yet poor, poverty is inevitably at once ironic and tragic.

The solution to poverty given metaphorically in the *Lotus Sutra* has two major dimensions: first, discontinuing ignorance of the poor and making a place for them within the overlapping and integrated contributory networks of the local socio-economic and natural ecosystems; and secondly, providing the poor with clear avenues for mounting contributions to those ecosystems. An important element in the *Lotus Sutra* narrative is that alleviating and eventually

eliminating poverty involves drawing the poor into increasingly responsible positions that allow them to make an ever more significant difference for others, but also for themselves.

There is much that is policy relevant in such an understanding of the basic dynamics of poverty alleviation. First, and very much in keeping with the karmic liabilities that formed the ironic core of the depiction of social collapse in the *Cakkavatti-Sihanda Sutta*, poverty alleviation cannot be accomplished through one-time, one-way gifts or welfare state supports. More positively framed, the provision of material or financial welfare (in the form of simple handouts) does not establish sufficient relational connections between the poor and those who are not for the poor to truly benefit. By themselves, material or financial *means* for exiting poverty are not enough. Much more important, in actuality, is the provision of concrete and well-defined contributory opportunities for the poor.

As illustrated in the *Lotus* story, it is not that the poor are unaware of the world that has set them apart. They can approach that world—the world of full employment and business and trade, for example. But they cannot imagine how they would fit into such a world—not, at least, without being even further disadvantaged. As poverty deepens, it begins effecting an atrophy of imaginative capacity that renders the poor less and less capable of seeing the possibilities in a given situation. Poverty means being in a poor position to appreciate present opportunities, to see how a situation can be opened up for sustained flourishing.

It must be immediately stressed, however, that this imaginative atrophy is not primarily rooted in any lack of individual intelligence, creativity, and insightfulness among the poor. It is function of *relational constriction*—the systemic shrinking and closure of relational possibilities that is a signal manifestation of the suffering associated with deepening poverty. In the *Cakkavatti-Sihanda Sutta*, this is

metaphorically represented in the rapidly decreasing lifetimes and vitality that accompany poverty-triggered social collapse. Increasing poverty brings with it decreasing relational scope, shorter spans of sustained attention, and eventually severe crises of commitment.

As is true for addressing the atrophy of physical abilities, the counteractive to poverty-induced relational constriction and imaginative atrophy is to steadily build up strength through a clear and open pathway or trajectory of incremental capability development. This need not mean a top-down, expertly designed program for the “improvement” of the poor. Such plans—like those of the hapless king in the *Cakkavatti-Sihanda Sutta*—can very easily backfire if the values embedded in them are not consonant with the needs of those who are intended to benefit from them. Indeed, if the problem is an atrophy of relational imagination and creative capability, it is quite clear that this cannot be “given” to the poor. The task is to provide concrete and clear relational openings for the poor to develop their appreciative and contributory resources, while at the same time drawing them into sustained attention training, building the basic resources needed to develop and sustain appreciative and contributory commitments.

A major implication of this is that there must be a clear absence of structural limits, from the perspective of the poor, for building and exercising appreciative and contributory virtuosity. There must, in other words, not be any institutionalized ceilings that cap the enhancement of both commitments to and resources for offering. Insuring, for example, that the poor have ready access to low wage jobs, but nothing more, may alleviate the worst of material poverty but will not bring about the ultimate elimination of poverty. Providing education through secondary school is valued and valuable to the extent that it leads to enhanced employment opportunities—opportunities to offer new abilities and knowledge. But if such employment opportunities are not available and people are effectively forced to work in



capacities that are not challenging, their imaginative capacity will again atrophy and their poverty will become further entrenched.

It is in connection with employment that the karmic liabilities of understanding freedom in terms of choice come most clearly into focus. Poverty alleviation initiatives that center on job creation are strategically committed to providing employment options and increasing individual and gross national income levels. Such options and income increases are measurable in purely quantitative terms, and this would seem to imply that poverty alleviation is or can be measured similarly. However, options are not the same as opportunities and—especially as defined in Buddhist terms—poverty is not essentially a function of low income. The sheer number of available jobs—the vast majority of which may be low-wage and unskilled—is not a measure of the *qualitative* possibilities for relational enhancement that are indicative of robust employment *opportunity* and the sustained enrichment of appreciative and contributory resources on which the promise of poverty elimination ultimately depends. Being free to choose among (typically low-wage) job options is not the same as being personally enabled and structurally empowered to relate freely in the context of any given situation, as it has come to be.

Poverty alleviation must, that is, be both driven by and measured in qualitative, relational terms. Globally, perhaps the clearest mandate for moving in this direction is given in the Bhutanese development agenda of increasing gross national happiness, not merely gross national product. This agenda effectively insists that happiness, and not growth, serve as the signal value of development. Although the specific concept of happiness to which appeal is made will clearly affect the karma associated with such a development agenda, it nevertheless represents a decisive turn away from the quantitative value of growth toward a value—and hence a pattern of outcomes and opportunities—that is irreducibly qualitative.

## Issues of Measurement

This raises, of course, serious questions about measurement. How might a qualitatively oriented poverty alleviation initiative be reliably and accurately evaluated? What measures might be used to gauge even relative success and failure? Here, it is perhaps sufficient to simply argue for the possibility of measuring poverty alleviation in irreducibly qualitative terms since the most virulent critics will insist that any such measurements will unavoidably be subjective in nature and thus inevitably open to objective contest.

As Thomas Kasulis has pointed out in the context of working through the heuristic implications of distinguishing between intimacy and integrity oriented cultural dispositions, evaluations that are explicitly both qualitative and objective are entirely familiar. They form the core of judging, for example, gymnastic, musical, and artistic competitions. Doing so requires intimate knowledge of the activity being judged—a knowledge that is experientially and relationally acquired and conditioned, and yet that is also profoundly consensual. The same will inevitably be true of judging or evaluating qualitatively driven poverty alleviation initiatives. The most reliable, insightful, and objective judges will be those who have mastered the relational capacities and resources relevant to the qualities or values in question.

Given the dynamics of poverty generation and elimination—at least as understood in the Buddhist terms that have been suggested in this paper—it would seem that skill in offering would be one well-defined relational nexus through which a poverty alleviation initiative might be qualitatively and yet objectively assessed. The skilled performance of offering, in other words, can be reliably indexed in terms of appreciative and contributory virtuosity.

This said, however, care must be taken to keep in mind the implied caution given in the *Sakkapanha Sutta*: even such valued qualities of relationship and experience as happiness and equanimity can, under certain conditions, be conducive

to unwholesome or *akusala* turns of events. An ironic and tragic contemporary instance of this might be the use of a Buddhist-inflected political rhetoric of offering by the military junta in Myanmar to encourage participation in manifestly unskillful attempts to establish national security and order. Finally, policies are only as virtuosic as the values-intentions-actions through which they are concretely embodied. The ultimate direction and dynamics of poverty alleviation depend crucially, then, on both the virtuosity and the virtue of those framing and enacting policy—their wisdom, attentive mastery, and moral clarity.

The ultimate antidote to poverty—the key to its skillful alleviation and final elimination—is the “noble wealth” that results from a clear and committed practice of benefiting and resolving the suffering of all sentient beings. To some degree, this will almost always entail “facing the world and going crosswise”—Chan master Linji’s way of summarizing what his great-grandfather in the Dharma, Mazu, referred to as the practice of “benefiting what cannot be benefited, and doing what cannot be done.” The conventional reality of our situation, as it has come to be, is that poverty cannot be globally eliminated. Ultimately, however, that is precisely what we must do, moment by increasingly virtuosic moment. The path of poverty alleviation may be endless, yet we must vow to travel it all.