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**GREED AND ACQUISITION AS IMPEDIMENTS
FOR ECONOMIC JUSTICE
INSTRUMENTALITY OF WEALTH CREATION
FOR A BUDDHIST VISION OF A FAIRER SOCIETY**

Mahinda Deegalle

Introduction

This paper examines Buddhist insights in understanding to what extent greed, a foundational mental disposition for acquisitive behavior towards wealth, can potentially create unfair social contexts in generating unequal distribution of wealth and a basis for an unbalanced and unjust society. An assertion of this paper is that not only greed and acquisitive attitudes create inequalities leading to unjust economic frameworks, the state's inability to address effectively issues of poverty and over a period of time its neglect to put in place fair frameworks for redistribution of wealth among her population can aggravate a phenomenon of unjust social conditions further contributing to serious social problems such as crimes, violence and conflicts.

Buddhist Emphasis on Economic Justice

Economic justice is only a significant component of measuring and achieving widely sought and asserted social justice as a key feature of good governance in the contemporary world. Economic justice can be considered as based on a set of moral principles of building fairer economic frameworks and institutions that aim to create better living opportunities for each individual. Measures of economic justice aim to create sufficient material foundations for

each individual in a given society to lead a dignified, productive and creative life in which ambitions of success and fulfillment can be materialized in a tangible manner.

It would be hard to find a single Buddhist term that covers and identifies all moral and ethical aspects of economy associated with the term 'economic justice.' The closest term in Theravāda Buddhist texts that may refer to and capture the notion of economic justice meant in contemporary world would be the Pāli term *dhammika* ('fairness' or 'righteousness').

In conversations about the right livelihood (*sammā ājiva*) and the methods of production of wealth that could be used by Buddhist practitioners, Buddhist texts have often emphasized the importance of adhering to the notion of *dhammika* that governs the economic process of acquiring more wealth.

There are standard expressions that highlight the importance of 'fairness' in the process of acquisition of wealth. A few examples found in the Buddhist texts are: (a) *bhogā laddhā sahadhammena* (I acquired wealth by employing 'fair' (righteous) means), (b) *dhammikā dhammaladdhā* (I acquired fairly and justly), (c) *bhogāme uppajjanti sahadhammenāti* (I am acquiring wealth through 'fair' (righteous) means).¹ The Buddha suggested that the appropriate form of wealth is one that is acquired fairly (*dhamma laddhehi*), justly (*dhammikehi*) and with effort by sweating labour (*sedhāvakkitehi*).

All of these Pāli expressions testify the great importance assigned to the aspect of 'fairness,' 'righteousness,' or 'justice' involved in the process of creating wealth for one's consumption and that of others. Personal effort in the process of acquisition of wealth is also recognized as an important factor of acquiring wealth fairly.

Buddhism is unequivocal in maintaining that 'fairness' in the process of acquiring wealth is an essential requirement. It is only this form of wealth acquired employing 'just' means are meaningful and suitable to be used for one's success in family life and in the promotion of religious and social welfare activities.

The Role of Wealth in Householder Lives

Emphasizing lives after death, Buddhism does not neglect existential rewards of ethical life in this world. Buddhist worldview is inclusive to suggest the importance of our 'conquest of two worlds' (*ubhaya loka vijaya*). The *Sigālovāda Sutta*, for example, states explicitly the value of entering the path of winning both this and next worlds (*ubhayalokavijayāya paṭipattiṃ hoti*).² It can be argued winning the spiritual realm necessarily involves winning first the material realm.

Economic success can be a solid foundation for one's spiritual conquest and further progress. Buddhist recommendation of the middle path and the right livelihood includes securing the development and stability in the material realm. In other words, spiritual development can occur in a sound economic context. An integrated, balanced way of life can avoid weaknesses of extreme lifestyles.

An extremely relevant scriptural passage on the acquisition of wealth and its rightful, fair use is found in the *Rāsiya Sutta* of the *Samyutta Nikāya*. The Buddha addressed Rāsiya using following words:

The householder (*kāmaḥhogī*) should acquire wealth righteously, without harming others (*asāhasena*). Having acquired wealth righteously, without harming others, s/he enjoys wealth, rejoices it, divides it and spends it on charitable activities. Without gone to the extreme in wealth acquisition, without being

deluded, without losing wisdom, seeing negative impact of wealth and developing wisdom of non-attachment, s/he consumes wealth.³

The *Rāsiya Sutta* has clearly laid out how a householder should develop proper attitudes towards acquisition of wealth, its fair use and development of an attitude of non-attachment towards it contemplating on its instrumentality and utility. This is one way that the Buddha guided his lay audience to find a suitable way of life in the community. For the layperson, acquisition of wealth is an essential endeavour. Rather than stating that the acquisition of wealth is bad and negative, the Buddha pointed out to lay people the way they should acquire wealth fairly, justly and righteously. Wealth acquired by such fair manners can be placed for effective use to enrich this as well as next worlds through engagements in spiritual activities.

Buddhism expresses a great concern for humanity and environment by qualifying the process of acquisition of wealth using a very important Pāli term *asāhasa*. This term made of *a+sāhasa* means an activity “free of violence” (Rhys Davids and Stede 1986: 88). In the *Jātaka*, it is used in its instrumental form as *asāhasena* (J.VI.280) “by means of free of violence.” The Buddha’s emphasis on the aspect of minimizing (or absolute lack of) harm to anyone is an essential element highlighted. Wealth acquired ‘without harm’ to anyone is accepted and appreciated in the Buddhist traditions. The discussions elaborate moral aspects of the process of acquisition of wealth. With regard to the acquisition of wealth the challenge for a Buddhist is that there is a requirement emphasized here in the ‘fair acquisition’ (*dhammena bhoge pariyesati*) as well as in the ‘fair consumption’ without damage (harm or violence) to oneself, others and wider society (*dhammena bhoge pariyesitvā asāhasena attānaṃ sukheti pīnēti*). This passage makes clear that in the fair acquisition and rightful use of wealth, attention should be paid to ‘non-violence’

and consequences of the economic process must be taken into consideration.

In light of Buddhist theory of causality, acquisition of wealth by harming others can generate negative *kamma*. Harmful consumption also carries negative consequences. In the Buddhist traditions acting in a harming way goes against the prescribed moral norms.

Buddhist Perspectives on Wealth

(a) *The Value of Wealth*

In the Pāli language a more frequent general reference to wealth is 'dhana.' In combination, the phrase '*aḍḍha mahāḍḍhana mahābhoga*' often refers to 'immense wealth' that one possesses. The wish to have wealth is *dhanatthika* and greed for wealth is *dhanalobha* (Rhys Davids and Stede 1986: 335). In the Buddhist vocabulary, there are several related terms such as *vatthu* (property), *bhoga* (possession), *dhañña* (grain) and *santaka* (belongings), which communicate wealth related aspects of one's material success. While it is recognized that all of these terms have slight variations in meaning and significance, nevertheless they signify a person's worth and value in quantifiable terms.

Wealth is often spoken in terms of material possessions. The fact that Buddhism was born in an agrarian context bears a significant emphasis on wealth associated with agriculture. For instance, in ancient Indian society having cows was regarded as a source of great wealth. There are references such as "there is no wealth equal to cattle": (*natthi go samitam dhanam*).⁴ Over the centuries, what is considered wealth has changed and is still changing drastically. Cattle alone may not be spoken of as an indicator of being wealthy in Buddhist societies today as it was in the Buddha's time.

At least on a mundane level, there is a closer link between the amount of wealth one possesses (or lacks) and the possibility (or limitations) of accessing resources that generate comfort and happiness. In general, wealth functions as an instrument of achieving other myriad of worldly as well as spiritual objectives.

In most societies today human happiness is the yardstick that determines the utility of having wealth or being rich. As it was *eudaimonia* in the time of Aristotle (384–322 BCE),⁵ human happiness has become the driving force and the central priority in our lives shaped largely by this-worldly world orientation of humanism, utilitarian ethics, notions of welfare state and democratic political structures. Using a closely related Pāli term to happiness, the Buddha had maintained two and a half millennium ago mental and physical “satisfaction (or contentment) is the ultimate wealth” (*santutthi paramam dhanam*)⁶ that fulfills human lives.

(b) *Wealth Not a Luxury, but an Absolute Necessity*

Buddhists may see instrumental value and utilitarian functions in wealth. For success in householder lives in contemporary world, wealth is the primary condition and an essential factor. Increasing potency of wealth in a market economy makes wealth even more important today than it was in the Buddha’s time.

Buddhism views wealth as a required solid foundation and an absolute necessity for success in householder life. Wealth enables one to purchase both ordinary necessities and luxurious things. Happiness and joyous lives largely depend upon accessibility to wealth. In many cases in householder lives, wealth functions as an absolute necessity rather than being merely a feature of luxurious lifestyle.

Religious insights in Buddhist scriptures highlight both the value of wealth and its acquisition. In understanding the value of

acquisition of wealth, the Discourse on the Blind (*Andha Sutta*) of the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (A.III.128f) is an important one. Its explanation of three types of persons helps us understand Buddhist attitudes to acquisition of wealth. The first type is a (i) blind (*andha*) person who does not possess eyes to “acquire wealth that is not yet acquired” (*anādhigataṃ vā bhogaṃ adhigaccheyya*) and “increase the existing acquired wealth” (*adhigataṃ vā bhogaṃ phātiṃ kareyya*). From this observation it is clear that this blind person has failed to realize economic ambitions that a householder must have.

In contrast, the second type of (ii) person has only one eye. That person can acquire wealth, but fails to recognize the importance of distinctions such as good and bad in the process of acquiring wealth. Because s/he lacks virtues and moral framework necessary in the process of acquiring wealth that person disregards the aspect of fair acquisition of wealth.

In contrast to these two types of persons, this particular discourse praises (iii) the third person who has two-eyes. The reason for the praise is that s/he can see well and is able to acquire wealth successfully. In addition, that person recognizes the importance of distinctions such as good and bad. As a result of ethical knowledge, that person adheres to moral codes in the process of acquisition of wealth. Because of fairness in acquisition of wealth, that person is able to increase her/his wealth in a justifiable manner. Furthermore, that person uses wealth in a meaningful manner to enhance her/his livelihood as well as that of others (A.I.128–129).

The text highlights that the acquisition of wealth is an important part of householder life. A person who wants to be successful and joyous has to acquire wealth by paying attention to moral norms. S/he is obligated to fair acquisition of wealth and meaningful use of it so that acquired wealth enhances one's own wellbeing as well as that of others.

This *Discourse on the Blind* makes clear the fact that having moral sensibilities alone is not adequate to lead a successful life. A person of such a limited vision is not considered as having even one eye.

Buddhism does not condemn wealth as intrinsically negative. Wealth itself is not the problem. The Buddha appears to have considered wealth as an essential element of being a successful layperson. Buddhist discourses guide us to understand the nature of human happiness and how wealth can be a useful and essential basis in achieving happiness. The *Anana Sutta* mentions four types of happiness: (i) happiness that one derives from acquiring wealth through righteous means (*atthi sukha*), (ii) happiness that one derives from the consumption of righteously acquired resources (*bhoga sukha*), (iii) happiness that one derives from being free from debts (*anana sukha*), and (iv) happiness that one derives from following a lifestyle free of wrong conduct (*anavajja sukha*).

Buddhism praises importance of simplicity for happiness and it became a cornerstone of Buddhist monastic life. Simple lifestyles prescribed and commended for Buddhist monastics enabled them to flourish with less needs and less burden to society at large. Such simple lifestyles also enabled others to flourish because they were given space to grow and get along with their lives.

Buddhism advocated frugality but not poverty as a virtue. Buddhism does not celebrate poverty. It is even a misconception to think so. Neither it does celebrate suffering! Becoming poor can be conceived as a cause of immense suffering on a personal level. It is an existential misery to the poor person and a cause of concern for everyone around the poor.

Poverty draws more attention today becoming an intensely burning global political and economic issue. Buddhist teachings

discuss the importance of states tackling poverty because it is an existential form of suffering and overcoming suffering is a necessity. In miserable conditions such as poverty, responsibilities lie in the enlightened communities to adopt measures to eliminate all forms of poverty. Having access to wealth and material resources can make it easier for people to live comfortably. There is a humanitarian obligation to avoid miserable conditions globally—a key challenge for good governance—for enhancing human happiness on earth.

If one uses the language of freedom to discuss poverty, becoming free from poverty can be seen as a form of liberation in this world itself. It is now widely considered that world nations have moral obligation to eliminate poverty in every corner of the world. Statistics of those who die due to extreme form of poverty is rather astonishing/staggering. Because of the need of urgent attention to poverty, the United Nations declared a second decade for the eradication of poverty (2008–2017) in addition to the first decade of poverty eradication (1997–2006).⁷

One of the key factors of global poverty is not mere lack of resources. Petty-mindedness that empowers the rich to hoard economic resources beyond what they actually need also contributes to it. In addition to hoarding of resources, use of unethical and unrighteous means to acquire a mass of wealth may also play a significant part in aggravating the problem of poverty.

A vicious circle on global scale emerges that powerful people become richer at the cost of vulnerable groups who have no access to economic resources. It is recorded that the number of billionaires with a combined wealth worth of more than £301 billion rose to 104 for the first time in the UK in 2014.⁸ None of the media outlets neither consider nor bother to calculate precisely what would be the least earned millions of the planet consume of global wealth.

Poverty is highly mundane, temporary circumstance, which may not be impacted totally by the notion of *karma*. Anyway, a lot of poverty in the modern world cannot be explained satisfactorily as resulting from the workings of religious principles such as *karma*. It is quite clear world poverty is an immediate outcome of state mismanagement and mal-distribution of resources, poor styles of governance, perpetuation of inadequate administrative structures, lack of opportunities to access financial resources to begin a productive lifestyle and certain personal defects and habits of individual persons such as excessive laziness and lack of enthusiasm and vision. Nevertheless certain personal psychological traits, cultural attitudes and practices may be connected with aggravating poverty. What is very important is making opportunities available for people to achieve what they aspire to in order to enable them to lead fulfilled lives.

The *Discourse on the Blind* seems to imply that a poor person who does not have adequate wealth to satisfy his/her own fundamental needs cannot be expected to uphold a truly virtuous lifestyle because of the weak economic foundations and his/her inability to meet the needs of the personal and social environment. It is assumed that such a person is more likely to be disgruntled with the social, political and economic situation and becomes frustrated naturally due to the lack of economic resources. It appears that it can be relatively easier for a wealthy person to be virtuous because his/her basic necessities are easily fulfilled and have resources to pursue other interests either material or spiritual.

The *Discourse on the Blind* thus points out the importance of unique combination of a proper balance of moral conduct with virtues alongside the desire and aspiration of acquiring wealth in the form of economic resources.

Wealth is a basic necessity for a comfortable life in today's world. Many life achievements, including education, training and

travel, are possible when there are adequate financial resources for one's use. The negative side of acquisition of large quantities of wealth is that by nature human beings are prone to be greedy, more acquisitive to hoard and perhaps may use wealth even in corrupted pursuits rather than using it in activities that enhance the lives of everyone.

(c) *Fairness in the Production of Wealth*

Buddhist economic thought pays attention to fairness in the production of wealth. Buddhism maintains that in the production of wealth there should not be any harm to anyone, either human or non-human. This inclusive approach embraces nature and environment in a meaningful way in ensuring wellbeing of humans as well as other ecological systems. Issues of preservation and conservation should be at the heart of economic production of a corporation or country.

The non-exploitive economic model that Buddhism promotes discusses fairness embedded in the economic production by making observations to the lifestyle of honey collecting bees. In the *Sigālovāda Sutta* (Discourse on Advice to *Sigāla*) the imagery of "a bee that collects honey from a flower without harming the flower" (*bhoge saṃharamānassa bhamarasseva iriyato*)⁹ is used to highlight the importance of an ideal lifestyle of non-exploitive existence:

He who acquires his wealth in harmless ways
like to a bee that honey gathers,
riches mount up for him
like ant hill's rapid growth (Narada Thera 1985: 11).

According to the Buddha, wealth of a person, who collects it like a bee without employing non-exploitive means, grows like an

anthill (*vammika*). With a specific reference to Buddhist renunciant lifestyle, the *Dhammapada* (v. 49) makes the same point of non-exploitation more vividly as follows:

Even as a bee, having taken up nectar
From a flower, flies away,
Not harming its color and fragrance,
So may a sage wander through a village
(Carter and Palihawadana 1987: 20).

This conviction of fair and non-exploitive acquisition of wealth shapes Buddhist understanding that maintains economic production of an individual, society or country should not become a burden to other humans, society or its natural environment.

It is a fact of real life that without adequate earnings, one may not have enough wealth to spend for daily needs. This makes it even more sensible to assert that workers should receive reasonable payments as salary. Without earning an adequate amount, a person may not be able to save. With no savings, one would not have resources to depend on at times of illness or emergencies. Most importantly, without savings, one cannot invest more in one's profession for further development. When, one looks at the discourses that the Buddha preached, it seems that the Buddha paid attention to all of these related aspects. It is also understood that only when people earn enough, they are able to share their resources with others; they can aid others in eliminating poverty around them.

Unfair acquisitions of economic resources are serious moral problems for Buddhist economics. Unfair acquisitions of profit should be monitored by those who have power to do so. Abusing workers by denying them proper wages, benefits and rights and the exploitation of their resources are not seen in a positive manner. Such exploitive practices are discouraged because of inherent

unfairness in them. In addition to problematic nature of acquiring materials things, those exploitive economic agents themselves can be viewed as subjecting themselves to significant losses of opportunities for spiritual growth and renewal.

d) *The Foundation of Just Society is Wealth Distribution*

The Buddha did not recommend handing out wealth on *ad hoc* basis to individuals as state policy. In one of the most important Buddhist scriptures useful in understanding the role of ruler in poverty alleviation and wealth distribution the *Cakkavattisihanāda Sutta* (Discourse on the Lion's Roar of the Wheel-turning Monarch) of the *Dāgha Nikāya* - explains causes of moral decline and spread of violence and crimes (Deegalle 2015: 2-5). Poverty is identified as the leading factor that results in increasing criminal activities.

An important royal duty of a wheel-turning monarch (P. *cakkavatti*; Skt. *cakravarti*) was paying attention to causes of poverty and managing the spread of crimes. As royal duty, the monarch must take steps to protect the poor in the process of creating peaceful, harmonious and prosperous society. It is monarch's duty to provide righteous protection (*dhammikaṃ hi kho rakkhāvaranaguttim*)¹⁰ to all living beings. This includes animals and environment as Emperor Asoka implemented in his royal policies:

For many hundreds of years in the past, slaughter of animals, cruelty to living creatures, discourtesy to relatives, and disrespect for priests and ascetics have been increasing. But now, because of King Priyadarṣī's practice of Dharma, the sound of war drums has become the call to Dharma [rather than to war], summoning the people to exhibitions of the chariots of the gods, elephants, fireworks, and other divine displays. King Priyadarṣī's inculcation of Dharma has increased, beyond anything observed in many

hundreds of years, abstention from killing animals and from cruelty to living beings, kindness to human and family relations, respect for priests and ascetics, and obedience to mother and father and elders (Nikam and McKeon 1959: 31; Deegalle 2014: 580).

An important state obligation is to provide wealth in the form of capital for people who are eager and desirous of working hard to improve their economic conditions. The *Cakkavattisihanāda Sutta* states that the king:

Arranged rightful shelter, protection and defense—but he did not give money to the poor. [Because of this] poverty flourished, a man intentionally took from others what [they] had not given [him] . . . the noble warrior king . . . gave money to the man, saying ‘with this money, my good fellow, you (can) provide yourself with a living, look after your mother and father . . . set up a business . . . people heard (others saying) ‘it seems that the king gives money to those who intentionally [steal] from others . . . Why don’t we [do the same]?’ (Collins 1998: 606–607).

The neglect of investment from the part of the state leads to lack of job creation, unemployment, theft and violence and resulting moral decline in wider society. Seeds of poverty spread when rulers mismanage resources and economy (Deegalle 2009:38–48) and fail to take effective steps to invigorate the economic infrastructure and increase investments. Poverty can become aggravated when the ruler does not protect the vulnerable groups and provide access to necessary financial resources to the poor for making a living. This state centred investment activities and economic management cannot be taken grossly and literally as cases of states handing out money to individuals but more to do with empowering activities for vulnerable poor in providing access to resources for making a living and involving in income generation. The state support cannot be taken as making available funds for people’s

consumption but for increasing opportunities of investment to revitalize the economy.

From the mythical narrative of the *Cakkavattisihanāda Sutta* it is clear the idea that handing out wealth to individuals (for example, to those who steal) would not resolve the social problem of stealing and would not work as an effective state policy. It clearly states that handing out wealth to the poor did not stop spread of crimes and violence when the entire society is engulfed with misery of poverty. When poverty is widespread, it needs to be dealt with effectively with robust economic programmes treating it as a wider social issue rather than considering fixing it as a case of an individual circumstance. The vicious reality that emerges from mismanagement of poverty by the royal authority as recorded in the *Cakkavattisihanāda Sutta* is quite alarming and a powerful insight in understanding contemporary social issues. The Buddha pointed out a causal link in the crisis:

In this way, monks, money not being given to the poor, poverty flourished; because poverty flourished, theft flourished; because theft flourished, weaponry flourished; because weaponry flourished, murder flourished; because murder flourished, these beings' vitality decreased, as did their beauty; because their vitality and beauty decreased, those who lived for eighty thousand years had children who lived for (only) forty thousand (Collins 1998: 608).

From the Buddha's point of view, the state's responsibility lies with the establishment of just and fair economic and financial policies for creation of new wealth and redistribution of wealth within the state in a fair manner so that the most vulnerable in society can also claim some benefits. The state policy must have all her citizens' welfare in mind and not just a segment of population either on the top, middle or bottom.

Early Buddhist scriptures such as the *Cakkavattisihanāda Sutta* highlight the state's leadership and primary responsibility to citizens in preventing economic, social and political crises. Violence

free, economically sound society enables individual freedom and wellbeing of each citizen. The policy option of allowing and enabling a tiny minority of overall population to own, consume and reap benefits of large proportions of society's wealth while denying equal access to financial resources to the majority is rejected as unsuitable. Buddhist teachings seem to discourage hoarding up of wealth and other resources and encourage the meaningful use of wealth in creating employment, increasing further investments and enhancing welfare programmes.

The Buddhist economic model proposed in the *Kūṭadanta Sutta* (Discourse to Brahmin *Kūṭadanta*) favours state intervention in regulating economic affairs and ensuring foundational structures of society including politics and economic work for the benefit of all citizens (Deegalle 2015: 6). In terms of regulations and facilities required for speedy economic growth, Buddhism emphasizes the crucial role of the state's leadership. It also recognizes the crucial role of the state's commitment to investments in the economy in the hope of vitalizing it. Creating healthy lifestyles for citizens largely depends on economic prosperity.

The state's leadership also requires a genuine vision of methods of distribution of wealth among citizens. The state has the moral duty and actual potential to place proper mechanisms for wealth distribution. This does not mean that the state hands out wealth to individuals on an ad hoc basis but installs mechanisms that everyone can participate in economic production process and can make a living by active participation in it. The ability to recognize individual potentiality for effective economic contribution is a key successful feature of the policy maker. State policies should adopt fair and just means of recruitment, proper training processes, appropriate promotion schemes and make most suitable appointments to key executive posts.

In implementing a broader framework that is inclusive and encouraging citizens to participate in the economic process the

state can make sure that each person can reap benefits of one's hard labour. When individuals are actively participating in the economic process, there is less opportunity and motivation from individuals to revolt and topple existing regimes. This enables to prevent moral crises and manage spread of crimes and violence. In the Buddhist vision, the key player in resolving social problems such as poverty, crime and violence lies in the vision and mechanisms of the state.

(e) *The Effect of Wealth: Human Attachment and Sharing*

The impact of wealth on individuals and society at large is an important economic as well as spiritual concern.

On some occasions, the Buddha discussed human attitudes to wealth. An important observation of the Buddha as found in the *Raṭṭhapāla Sutta* is that the world is by nature "incomplete" (*ūṇo loko*) and sooner or later people become "unsatisfied" (*atitto*). In addition, the world is by nature "a slave to craving" (*taṇhādāso*, M.II.68). These are propensities within humans against which human beings have to act often in all circumstances. Craving for wealth appears to be a basic propensity in human constitution. As if a natural instinct humans appear to run after wealth and material things. The greed for wealth and other desirable things appear to be an inherent character disposition of being a sentient being. Those who acquire a great mass of wealth are often not prepared to part from those resources easily.

Sharing wealth with others is not a value that most will cherish. The lack of sharing attitudes may be shaped from greed as well as ignorant perspectives on nature and value of wealth. It is easy to conclude that people tend to hoard wealth out of greed (M.II.72). An irony in human life is that most people who acquire a mass of wealth fail to enjoy benefits of having wealth. In a conversation with the king of Kosala, it is pointed out that "the riches that are

not rightly utilized run to waste” and they are not used for human “enjoyment.” The unpleasant situation is compared to a pure water lake. No one in thirst could use its pure water since it is located in a “savage” region (S.I.89–90).

The Buddha admired common ownership as well as common consumption. The monastic community (*saṅgha*) that the Buddha established epitomizes the aspect of common sharing. In the *Kosambiya Sutta*, the Buddha sets an example to his followers in dealing with poverty and resolving the issue of lack of resources. The Buddha stated that spiritual companionship is such that one always shares things with fellow spiritual seekers. His admonition to the monastic community was that without any reservation, monks should share with others in the community what they acquired righteously. In a specific case, it is mentioned that this extended even to the extent of sharing with others what one monk gathered in his alms-bowl.¹¹

It is acknowledged that human beings have certain reservations with regard to sharing their wealth and other resources. According to the Buddha’s teaching, psychological negative dispositions such as greed are the primary factors that lead human beings to consume alone rather than share with others. Personal attitudes of lack of sharing may translate into specific individual behaviours of looking down those who are poor. These mental attitudes and dispositions may lead to decline or lack of individual moral sensitivity and neglect of responsibilities to wider society as well as gross rejection of social obligations by placing wider society in serious trouble.

Driven by insatiable desires, people become agitated with jealousy and feel thoughts of ‘emptiness’ within themselves failing to appreciate and recognize even valuable things that they have in their possession. Emotions of ‘missing something’ in their lives make their lives even more miserable. In addition, unsatisfied

desires drive them to want more and more. At the same time, significant changes can occur in the mental dispositions and conduct. In the *Ariyavaṃsa Sutta* of the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* the Buddha stated that the attitude of “raising oneself to a high level in terms of praise” (*attukkaṃsana*) and lowering the dignity of “others with blames” and accusations (*paravambana*)¹² is a consequence of the growth of negative dispositions and inappropriate grasp and attachment to self.

Sharing must be encouraged for eliminating poverty as well for optimal use of earthly resources. It is possible to develop a notion of “fair consumption” (*sādhāraṇa bhogi*) in line with the Buddha’s teaching of right livelihood. Such a concept will be extremely valuable in overcoming issues of managing economic resources. The Pāli term “*saṃvibajati*” has connotations of sharing wealth with others. In most communities, the lack of will to share resources poses serious problems. Those who have ample resources can be flexible and proactive in sharing resources with the less privileged and the poor.

Greed as Impediment, Poison and Foundational Disposition for Acquisition of Wealth

Greed usually connotes negative meanings in the Buddhist traditions. In the Buddhist analysis of psychological formation of human conditioning, greed becomes one of the three formidable weaknesses. Buddhist traditions identify greed as one of the three poisons. Along with hatred and delusion, greed forms the three foundational roots of negative actions in all Buddhist traditions. The Theravada tradition characterizes the awakening experience as the absence of the three roots of negative activities.

On some occasions in later periods of Buddhist history, greed is used in rhetorical terms in a holistic manner to persuade people in developing aspirations for religious ends. On such contexts, the

texts state the greed for *dhamma* as well as greed for *nibbāna* in a positive light as motivational factors for spiritual development.

Greed is seen as a foundational disposition of acquisitive attitudes. It can also be categorized as a foundational psychological weakness in human beings. In terms of mental dispositions, drives that shape acquisitive mind can be identified as rooted in greed. According to Buddhist psychological evaluation, the desire to possess material and non-material things is a strong defilement. This distorted mindset can even disorient spiritual development of those beings. Nevertheless, acquisitive attitudes are very natural. Acquisitive tendencies are basic instincts of living beings due to their self-preservation instincts. Living beings are naturally programmed and so occupied in preserving their own existence and genes.

Greed for excessive acquisition of wealth and resulting economic injustice must be viewed from the perspective of Buddhist analysis of psychological and material transformation of human beings and the world around them. The *Aggañña Sutta* (Discourse on What is Primary) discusses how institutions such as kingship came into being as a result of greed for acquisition of resources that were freely available once for everyone's common consumption (Deegalle 2015: 5–6). Individual laziness combined with intensive greed seems to have resulted in the appearance of work for acquiring resources, stealing when individuals were short of needed resources, crimes committed in the protection and acquisition of resources and imposing punishment on those who had violated rules and committed acts of violence. Employing a narrative form, the *Aggañña Sutta* placed everything including the origin of social institutions such as kingship in an evolutionary scheme, where mental and physical factors mutually influence each other in creating complex propensities and social structures.

Acquisitive Attitudes Creating Unjust Society

Scholars have argued that unjust societies are the norm today than the exception. Criticizing prevalent economic patterns, many often maintain that acquisitive attitudes have enabled the creation of unjust social frameworks. The problem is broadly analyzed as the case in which humans tend to acquire and hoard resources thus preventing others' access to them.

From the Buddhist point of view, the tendency to acquire and hoard resources can be classified as a manifestation of greedy mental inclinations within sentient beings. Wealth has potential to spoil humans. With regard to wealth, human beings display a strong weakness. Greed and attachment of resources is a conditioning factor that governs human attitudes to wealth. Habitually people tend to acquire more and more wealth. In the process of acquisition of wealth, they lose sight of instrumentality of wealth. Instead of using wealth for worthy causes and consumption, most tend to hoard wealth habitually. Desire to retain, more than what one needs is the root of the crisis.

A serious problem associated with wealth and economic injustice is that there is no adequate mechanism in place to distribute wealth fairly among humans within a country or across the world. It is a significant problem both for developed as well as economically undeveloped nations. The implications of the lack of methods of fair distribution of wealth are more felt in poorer countries due to increasing cases of dire poverty of lack of food, housing, access to education and employment opportunities. The problem of economic injustice and world poverty is also closely associated with methods of acquisition and hoarding of wealth by individuals and the excessive profit making financial ethos of capitalist economies.

Conclusions

This paper has examined the Buddhist contribution to the understanding of what economic factors create just societies. It has focused on the extent to which personal and corporate 'greed' encourage acquisitive attitudes of individuals and collective bodies such as corporations to create unjust societies. This has further affirmed the importance of institutions that can ensure fair distribution of wealth across society on a humane and fair basis. In today's complex, economic world, there seems to be a close relationship between global poverty and the way industries and multi-national corporations are conducted. Exploitation of human labour in many shapes and forms may be one of the immediate factors of people's poverty around the globe. Cheap labour attracts investors to developing economies and their abuse of worker rights strengthen exploitation and aggravate vicious cycle of poverty placing workers in unhealthy working conditions. Another brutal aspect of this poverty trap is the process in which industries make their products disregarding damages caused to environment, such as polluting air and water resources and orchestrating climate changes. These directly affect livelihoods of the global poor. The relevance of the Buddha's message to policy makers of today would be to minimize dangers that industries, investments and productions can cause to humans, animals and environment. Encouraging simple lifestyles may be another way of rejecting over consumption and making resources available to global community.

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Endnotes:

- ¹ *Vyaggapajja Sutta* (Discourse to Vyaggapajja). See Narada Thera (1985: 22): “[W]hatsoever wealth a householder is in possession of,

obtained by dint of effort, collected by strength of arm, by the sweat of his brow, justly acquired by right means"; also [http://dharmaflower.net/_collection every manethics.pdf](http://dharmaflower.net/_collection_every_manethics.pdf).

- ² *Sigālovāda Sutta, Dīgha Nikāya, III, pp. 288-290 (BJTS)*
- ³ My translation of "*kāmbhogī dhammena bhoge pariyesati asāhasena dhammena bhoge pariyesitvā asāhasena attānaṃ sukheti pīṇeti saṃvibhajati pullāni karoti, te ca bhoge agathito amucchito anajjhāpanno ādinavadassāvi nissaraṇapaḷlo paribhuñjati*" *Rāsiya Sutta, Saṃyutta Nikya, IV, p. 604 (BJTS)*.
- ⁴ S.I.12 (BJTS).
- ⁵ See Thomson (1977: 73-90).
- ⁶ The *Dhammapada*, v. 204; Carter and Palihawadana 1987: 257.
- ⁷ <http://undesadspd.org/Poverty/UNDecadefortheEradicationofPoverty/SecondUNDecadefortheEradicationofPoverty.aspx> (accessed 26/11/2015).
- ⁸ "Rich List' Counts More Than 100 UK billionaires," 11 May 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-27360032> (accessed 26/11/2015).
- ⁹ "*bhoge saṃharamānassa bhamarass eva iriyato bhogā sannicayaṃ yanti vammiko v' upacīyati,*" *Sigālovāda Sutta, Dīgha Nikāya, III, p. 302 (BJTS)*.
- ¹⁰ *Cakkavattisihanāda Sutta, Dīgha Nikāya, III, p. 110 (BJTS)*.
- ¹¹ *Kosambiya Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya I, pp. 754-760 (BJTS)*.
- ¹² *Ariyavaṃsa Sutta, Aṅguttara Nikāya, II, p. 56 (BJTS)*.