

## A Study of Buddhist Attitudes towards on the Poverty and Its Alleviation for the Restoration of Economic Stability

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### Introduction

Wealth is not denounced and poverty is not commended in Buddhism. Amassing abundant wealth and the wealth earned through unrighteous means are rejected. Good use of wealth earned through right livelihood and forthright effort is encouraged. The Buddha says that poverty (*dāḷiddiya*) is miserable in the world for a person who enjoys sensuality. This means that poverty is not acceptable as it is associated with *dukkha*. The term '*dukkha*' has been translated into English as suffering, misery, dissatisfaction, frustration, etc. 'Dukkha' in the context of poverty does not imply any significant distinction between mundane suffering (*lokika*) and some other transcendental sort (*lokuttara*). Hence, 'ill-being' is sometimes the best term to be used in this context. According to the Kuṭadanta Sutta, vices and moral decline caused due to poverty proliferates suffering in diverse aspects jeopardizing social peace and equality. The suttas like Kuṭadanta and Cakkavattisīhanāda reveal that social peace, equality, justice, harmony are harmed and crimes increase due to moral degradation committed through vices

impelled by poverty (absence of adequate wealth and reasources). According to Buddhist teachings, elimination of poverty should not be understood as the proliferation of wealth, more desires and wants which are to be satisfied by more consumables and luxuries. In this context, the significant distinction between one's needs and wants should be recognized. Needs – four requisites (food, clothes, shelter and medicine) should be fulfilled and wants should be limited and reduced as they are insatiable and boundless and the continuous appeasement of wants or desires will bring intense and destructive sufferings, miseries, stress, etc. to individual, family, society, environment and the world. Therefore, in Buddhism it is conspicuously emphasized that the establishment of economic stability is come into existence as a result of alleviation of poverty. Many Suttas such as: Cakkavattisīhanāda Sutta, Kuṭadanta Sutta, Andha Sutta, Dhana Sutta, Ugga Sutta provide sufficient details in relation to economic stability having alleviated the poverty in ethical and righteous manner.

### Buddhist attitudes on Poverty

As the Iṇa Sutta<sup>1</sup> reveals, poverty (*dāḷiddiya*) is suffering (*dukkha*) in the world for one who partakes of sensuality. Getting into debt is suffering in the world for a poor person who partakes of sensuality. A poor person, having gotten into debt, owes interest payments and interest payment is suffering in the world for a person who partakes of sensuality. When a poor person, owing interest payments, does not pay interest on time, the lenders serve



him notice. Being served notice for a poor person who partakes of sensuality is suffering in the world. And when a poor, being served notice, does not pay, they hound him. Being hounded is suffering in the world. And when a poor, being hounded, does not pay, he is put into bondage and bondage is suffering in the world for one who partakes of sensuality. Thus, poverty, getting into debt, interest payment, being served notice, being hounded and bondage are suffering in the world for one who partakes of sensuality. The deterioration of moral qualities propelled by poverty is suffering to the entire society.

According to Buddhism, poverty involves suffering which causes destruction of equality and peace in the society. As a philosophy of living which advocates the elimination of suffering, Buddhism does not commend poverty. Buddhism values detachment towards material goods and commends contented life (*santussako*), few duties (*appkicco*) light or simple living (*sallahukavutti*), easy to support (*subhara*) as mentioned in the Karaṇīya Metta Sutta,<sup>2</sup> fewness of wishes, having less wants or fewness of desires (*appicchata*)<sup>3</sup> as a virtue and balanced living (*samajīvikatā*).<sup>4</sup> Poverty is the non-possession of the basic material requirements for leading a decent life free from hunger, malnutrition, disease, bad health, loss of shelter, absence of other preliminary facilities for standard living, etc. Buddhism recognizes the significance of the fulfillment of the minimum material needs for a decent living even in the context of the aspirants of its higher spiritual goal. For instance, the four requisites for one who has renounced the worldly life are (i) food sufficient to

alleviate hunger and maintain good health, (ii) clothing to protect the body and to be socially decent, (iii) shelter for protection from rain, winds, etc. and for the undisturbed engagement with mind development and (iv) medicine sufficient to maintain health care, cure and prevent illnesses. As the Andha Sutta mentions, some persons are like the completely blind (*andho*) since they do not have the vision to improve their material wealth not yet acquired and increase wealth already acquired and also do not have the vision to lead morally raised life knowing wholesome and unwholesome qualities, blameworthy and blameless qualities, inferior and superior qualities and dark and bright qualities. Some are like the one-eyed (*ekacakkhu*) since they have the vision to improve their wealth not yet acquired and increase wealth already acquired but they do not see the necessity to lead a morally raised life knowing wholesome and unwholesome qualities, blameworthy and blameless qualities, inferior and superior qualities and dark and bright qualities. Those who are two-eyed (*dvicakkhu*) are likened to have the vision to improve both.<sup>5</sup> Only the increase or improvement of material conditions is not encouraged in Buddhism and a causal relationship exists between material poverty and ethical or social deterioration as the Cakkavattisīhanāda Suttas exposes. Thus, poverty, from this point of view does not involve the absence of an abundance of goods that stimulates the insatiable greed of man. In the Dhana Sutta,<sup>6</sup> the Buddha appreciates the seven kinds of 'wealth' – (1) the wealth of confidence – *saddhā* (placing confidence in the Enlightenment of the Buddha), (2) the wealth of moral conduct (developing one's character



through the establishment of the five precepts), (3) the wealth of moral shame (being ashamed of bodily, verbal and mental misconduct and acquiring bad and unwholesome qualities), (4) the wealth of moral dread (dreading of bodily, verbal and mental misconduct and acquiring bad and unwholesome qualities), (5) the wealth of learning (the teachings that are good in the beginning, good in the middle and good in the end, with right meaning and phrasing that proclaim the perfectly complete and pure spiritual life), (6) the wealth of generosity (sacrificing one's possessions for the benefit of others devoid of miserliness and delighting in giving and sharing) and the (7) wealth of wisdom (insight into three characteristics of existence – *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anatta*).<sup>7</sup> According to the Uggā Sutta, only the material types of wealth can be taken away by fire, water, kings, thieves and unpleasing heirs. However, the above seven types of wealth cannot be taken away by fire, water, kings, thieves and unpleasing heirs.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the absence of the seven types of 'noble wealth' is reckoned to be 'true poverty' that is even more miserable than that resulting from the lack of material resources.

The Ānāya Sutta<sup>9</sup> introduces the four kinds of bliss that can be attained by a householder in the proper season and on the proper occasions such as the bliss of having wealth, the bliss of making use of wealth, the bliss of debtlessness and the bliss of blamelessness. Thus, the wealth earned righteously is admired and poverty is not at all encouraged in the four types of bliss. Even the survival of the Buddhist Dispensation and contribution to spiritual life is dependent on good support from the people. When people

are stricken with poverty, an aspirant cannot find alms to survive healthily for the continuance of the practice. This is well elucidated in the Ariyapariyesana Sutta when the Bodhisatta was delighted at the charming environment in the military town of Uruvela where he saw some delightful countryside, with an inspiring forest grove, a clear-flowing river with fine, delightful banks, and villages for alms-going on all sides. Thinking that it was just right for the exertion of a clansman intent on exertion, he sat down right there.<sup>10</sup> Among the factors that conduce to right exertion, the villages for alms going are also taken into much consideration as it is mandatory for healthy survival.

Therefore, in a nutshell, poverty, according to Buddhist teachings, is the absence of material necessities that obstruct a decent living endowed with light living (*sallavukavutti*) and balanced living (*samajīvikatā*) through right livelihood (*sammā ājīva*). Therefore, I expect to collect and examine the Buddhist attitudes towards on wealth and poverty for the Restoration of Economic Stability.

### Psychological Causes of Poverty

The roots of all the unwholesome actions that cause social issues such as poverty, inequality, injustice are defilements which are the noxious psychological causes. The Buddhist analysis of the deep-rooted psychological causes of a social issue like poverty has so far been discussed on the basis of the noxious trio – passion, aversion and delusion. For instance, one of the most



detrimental psychological causes is the overindulgence in sensual pleasures that leads to overconsumption of material wealth and resources by rulers and minority class in a society making the majority of people stricken with poverty related suffering. Many rulers, their supporting elite class and officials exploit the people and lead a life of extreme gratification of sensual desires in the lap of luxury at the expense of common masses. The other psychological reason is that these rulers and officials bear no genuine attitudes to solve basic problems confronted by the countrymen. Instead, out of avariciousness and covetousness (*abhijjhā*) - two psychological reasons, great wealth and abundance of resources are collected, unimaginable amount of money is amassed through evil means and deposited in banks, palatial mansions furnished with extravagant facilities are built, vehicles of immensely expensive values are used, lands and property of great value even on foreign lands are bought and various illegal means of amassing wealth are manipulated while responsibilities to the society are neglected and various forms of oppression and deprivation in the life of people such as unequal distribution of wealth, exploitation of wealth by a minority plunging the entire country into poverty are committed. The Raṭṭhapāla Sutta points out how heads of state engage in destructive and aggressive wars due to their insatiable greed for power and wealth and bring destruction upon themselves as well as many others: A king wins territories through aggression as far as the surrounding ocean. Yet not being contented with that, he desires territories even beyond the shores.<sup>11</sup> This Sutta

mentions of wars that originate from aggressive intentions of greedy heads of state, a phenomenon that must have been frequently experienced in all parts of the ancient world.

The other psychological causes for individual, family or people to fall into poverty are their lack of enthusiasm, laziness, mental languor, sluggishness, lethargy, narrow-mindedness, lack of intellectual potentials, etc. Due to one or more of these reasons, individual or family does not strive hard in their work, business or any activities of livelihood as revealed in the Siṅgālovāda Sutta,<sup>12</sup> and this leads to a stagnant nature of life that brings about no progress of economic stability or loss of wealth. According to the Najīrati Sutta,<sup>13</sup> six faults in the world where wealth and property do not persist are (i) laziness, (ii) heedlessness, (iii) lack of action, (iv) lack of restraint, (v) sleepiness and (vi) sloth. A householder should avoid these six faults that dissipate wealth and goods.

In order to eradicate poverty that harms equality and peace and to develop economic stability, these unwholesome psychological frailties should be eliminated.

### **Social Causes of Poverty and Moral Deterioration**

Apart from the analysis of psychological causes, the Buddhist teaching has been realistic enough to recognize certain proximate causes associated with the material conditions of life – external causes that lead to poverty and its related issues. Material deprivation is seen as a key



source of conflict that jeopardizes equality and peace. In other words, poverty is considered a root cause of crime in the society. According to the Cakkavattisīhanāda Sutta<sup>14</sup> and the Kūṭadanta Sutta<sup>15</sup>, the roots of conflicts lie not only in individual consciousness but also exist in the very structure of society that encourages those roots to grow. These Suttas point out that when the economic order of society is of inequality, injustice and vicious economic disparities; a substantial section of the community is reduced to poverty and people rebel against such social order. According to the Kūṭadanta Sutta, the failure on the part of the ruler (state) to look after the essential needs of the people drive the people who are deprived of their needs to resort to crime and rebellion against the governance (state). The imposition of penalties to deal with such a situation does not produce the desired results. According to the Cakkavattisīhanāda Sutta,<sup>16</sup> any social order that does not address the problem of economic poverty creates conditions for social unrest resulting eventually in the total decline of the moral standards of society causing a lot of social issues, and the end result of it could be disastrous riots or wars. This Sutta points out how successive “wheel turning monarchs” prevented social problems by following the sage maxim “whosoever in your kingdom is poor, wealth should be given.” Ultimately there came a king who disregarded this advice and let poverty continue.<sup>17</sup> This illustrates that, though the ruler provides rightful shelter, protection and defense, he fails to give money to the poor and provide a means of right living which creates wealth for the poor. Then, in that society, poverty increases creating a violent

context. A poor man intentionally takes from others what has not been given. When the man is brought to the ruler, the ruler gives the man money because he has stolen since he cannot make a living. The ruler hopes that the man will set up a business and lead a stable life without resorting to crime.<sup>18</sup> But this did not happen. Hearing that the ruler (state) gives money to thieves, more and more people resorted to stealing in order to get assistance from the ruler. When the ruler hears that some steal because he gives money to thieves, he revises his policy and begins punishing thieves with death. However, to avoid being reported to the ruler, thieves begin to carry swords, kill people whose property they steal and launched murderous assaults on villages, towns and cities and indulged in highway robbery and violent murder. Once they got accustomed to this kind of violence resulting in killing, deliberate lying, evil speech, adultery, incest, covetousness and hatred, false opinions, lack of respect for parents, clan elders and the religious causing deterioration in all social norms.

The Cakkavattisīhanāda Sutta elucidates this factor in causal origination thus. When wealth is not given to the poor or unequally distributed, poverty comes into being; because poverty increases, theft occurs; because theft increases, weaponry increases; because weaponry increases, murder occurs; because murder increases, the beings' vitality decreases, etc. when violent conditions lead to decrease in life span: When people live for ten years, the ten courses of moral conduct will completely disappear and the ten courses of evil will prevail exceedingly. The idea of



'good' (*kusala*) will not exist. Men will not recognize women as 'mother,' 'mother's sister,' teacher's wife, etc.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the world will become thoroughly promiscuous (immoral) like goats and sheep, fowl and pigs, dogs and jackals. Among them, fierce enmity will prevail one for another, fierce hatred, fierce anger and thoughts of killing, mother against child and child against mother, father against child and child against father, brother against brother, brother against sister, just as the hunter feels hatred for the beast he stalks. There will be a seven-day period of war, when people will see each other as animals; sharp swords will appear in their hands and they will murder each other, each thinking 'This is an animal.'<sup>20</sup>

A disturbing picture of how a society can fall into utter confusion because of a lack of economic justice is presented in the Cakkavatti sīhanāda Sutta and the extremes reached are far greater than anything predicted in the Kūṭadanta Sutta as they prevent state's blindness to the realities of poverty. Thus, the complexity of issues is discussed and the importance of distributing wealth to the poor equally is emphasized. Once income is not distributed fairly among all the communities, the potential for crimes increase among the poor and as a result communities of every stratum encounter various forms of violence.

The Kūṭadanta Sutta reports thus, "The chaplain replied: Your Majesty's country is beset by thieves, it is ravaged, villages and towns are being destroyed, the countryside is infested with brigands. If Your Majesty were to tax this

region, that would be the wrong thing to do. Suppose Your Majesty were to think: 'I will get rid of this plague of robbers by executions and imprisonment, or by confiscation, threats and banishment', the plague would not be properly ended. Those who survived would later harm Your Majesty's realm. However, with this plan you can completely eliminate the plague. To those in the kingdom who are engaged in cultivating crops and raising cattle, let Your Majesty distribute grain and fodder; to those in trade, give capital; to those in government service assign proper living wages. Then those people, being intent on their own occupations, will not harm the kingdom. Your Majesty's revenues will be great, the land will be tranquil and not beset by thieves, and the people, with joy in their hearts, will play with their children, and will dwell in open houses."<sup>21</sup>

When poverty or economic deprivation is eradicated, peace, equality, happiness and coexistence are established. According to the above event mentioned in the Sutta, wealth and resources to support trade, agriculture and other occupations should be distributed and proper salaries should be paid to those engaged in occupations adequate to lead good life and this will eradicate material disparities and vices caused by them and bring about social equality, peace and happiness in the country



## The Alleviation of Poverty for the Restoration of Economic Stability

A householder with a large income were to lead a wretched life, there would be those who say this person will die like a starveling. Just as in the case of a great tank with four inlets and outlets, if a man should close the inlets and open the outlets and there should be no adequate rainfall, decrease of water is to be expected in that tank, and not an increase. The four sources for the increase of amassed wealth are Abstinence from debauchery, Abstinence from drunkenness, Non-indulgence in gambling and Friendship, companionship and intimacy with the good.

Just as in the case of a great tank with four inlets and four outlets, if a person were to open the inlets and close the outlets, and there should also be adequate rainfall, an increase in water is certainly to be expected in that tank and not a decrease, even so these four conditions are the sources of increase of amassed wealth.

Therefore, poverty or absence of adequate wealth, property and resources should be eradicated through the eradication of psychological, ethical, social and kammic factors that conduce to non-possession of wealth and resources as explicated in the above suttas. Dissipation, destruction and loss of wealth already acquired should be eliminated through the elimination of the Six Channels of Dissipation of Wealth (*cha bhogānaṃ apāyamukhāni*) as explicated in the Siṅgālovāda Sutta, immoral behaviour that wastes wealth as discussed in the Suttas like Pattakamma,

Parābhava, Vyagghapajja, etc. and refrain from the association of evil friends or foes in friendly guise (*amittāmittapatirūpakā*) and association of good friends (*suhadamitto*) revealed in the Siṅgālovāda Sutta.<sup>22</sup>

Buddhism which neither commends poverty nor appreciates attachment towards material wealth commends contented life (*santussako*), few duties (*appkicco*) light or simple living (*sallahukavutti*), easy to support (*subharo*), fewness of wishes or having less wants or fewness of desires (*appicchatā*)<sup>23</sup> as a virtue and balanced living (*samajīvikatā*) endowed with wholesome moral deportment. In Buddhism, poverty is termed as suffering for people who enjoy sensual pleasures as it disturbs individual, social and spiritual peaceful existence.

The most influential of the causes of poverty is the social factors that cause poverty such as non-possession of basic wealth and resources, economic disparities, unequal distribution of wealth, etc. Thus, poverty is reckoned to be a root cause of moral decline causing in the society such as theft, violence, killing, etc. The problem begins when the state (ruler) does not give property to the needy neglecting its responsibility to maintain distributive justice or equality. The solution to poverty-induced crime is not punishment but the provision of basic needs. All the psychological, ethical, social and kammic factors that are directly or indirectly conducive to poverty and dissipation of wealth should be eradicated to establish stability of wholesome wealth and wholesome economy in Buddhist perspective. Therefore, the four universally indisputable causal roots that



conduce to poverty discussed above should be eliminated for laying the basis for a morally civilized society where peace and equality that establish justice, harmony, human rights, etc. are restored.

### ABBREVIATIONS

AN	: Aṅguttara Nikāya
Dhp	: Dhammapada
DN	: Dīgha Nikāya
Khp	: Khuddakapāṭa
KN	: Khuddaka Nikāya
MN	: Majjhima Nikāya
SN	: Saṃyutta Nikāya
Sn	: Suttanipāta

### Pāli Text Translations (English)

CDB	: The Connected Discourses of the Buddha (Saṃyutta Nikāya)
Dhp	: Dhammapada
GD	: The Group of Discourses (Suttanipāta)
LDB	: The Long Discourses of the Buddha (Dīgha Nikāya)
MLDB	: The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha (Majjhima Nikāya)
NDB	: The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha (Aṅguttara Nikāya)

### Publications

PTS	: Pāli Text Society, London
WPB	: Wisdom Publications. Boston

### Endnotes

1. NDB (AN), 6.45 (3). WPB. p.914.
2. Khuddakapāṭha 9 / Suttanipāta 1.8.
3. NDB (AN), 114 (8). WPB. p. 987.
4. NDB (AN), 8.54 (4). WPB. p. 1194.
5. NDB (AN), 3.29 (9). WPB. p. 224.
6. NDB (AN), 7.5 (5). WPB. p. 1000 – 1001.
7. NDB (AN), 7.6 (6). WPB. p. 1000 – 1001.
8. NDB (AN), 7.7 (7). WPB. p. 1001 – 1002.
9. NDB (AN), 4.62 (2). WPB. p. 452 – 453.
10. MLDB (MN), 26. WPB. p.256.
11. MLDB (MN), 82. WPB.p.689.
12. LDB (DN), 31. WPB. p. 463.
13. CDB (SN), 76.6. WPB.p.136.
14. LDB (DN), 26. WPB. p. 395 ff.
15. LDB (DN), 5. WPB. p. 133 ff.
16. LDB (DN), 26. WPB. p.395 ff.
17. LDB (DN), 26. WPB. p. 398.
18. LDB (DN), 26. WPB. p.399.
19. LDB (DN), 26. WPB.p. 401.
20. LDB (DN), 26. WPB.p. 402.
21. LDB (DN), 5. WPB. p.135.
22. LDB (DN), 31. WPB. p.464 – 466.
23. NDB (AN), 114 (8). WPB. p. 987.



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9. Nārada, (1979), *Manual of Abhidhamma - Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha*, Bhadanta Anuruddhācariya, Edited in the original Pāli Text with English Translation and Explanatory Notes by Nārada Mahā Thera, Fourth revised edition, Published by the Buddhist Missionary Society, Malaysia.