

Buddhism, Economics and Science: Further Studies in Socially Engaged Humanistic Buddhism by Dr. Ananda W. P. Guruge (Authorhouse: 2008). Paperback; 208 pages.

The distinguished Dr. Ananda W. P. Guruge has produced an interesting collection of critical synopses of prominent attempts to find common ground between Buddhist or Buddhist-inspired ideas on the one hand, and modern science and modern economics on the other. He critically reviews first and more recent attempts by Western and Asian thinkers to frame a Buddhist Economics and to discover the consistency (or identity) of various assumptions, methods or results of science with one or another interpretation, style, or branch of Buddhism. Prof. Guruge's brief but careful accounts of early failures in both areas are remarkable in being as charitable as his critiques are incisive. He clears away a lot of error, and presents in condensed synopsis a wide range of potential areas of convergence. Throughout he makes extensive use of quotations in recounting the various theories and texts, a procedure he justifies by claiming it facilitates the expression of "underlying nuances". Nuances do become apparent, but they might have done so by other means of exposition as well. A better justification, in light of what follows in the book, is that profuse quotation allows the author transparently and with all due fairness to represent views with which he profoundly disagrees. And yet in some cases divergence of opinion is underrepresented, or misrepresented, so that a rosier picture of compatibility is presented than is merited. But a book can have worse sins than optimistic over-reaching toward cross-cultural understanding.

The book has two parts, the first on economics, and the second on science. Part One, entitled "Buddhist Economics: Myth or Reality?", is the longer of the two, although the span of ideas in Part Two is considerably greater. Part Two is accordingly sketchier in its treatment, and will be largely passed over in this review. The possible points of consistency or convergence between Buddhism and science constitute a topic far broader in scope than economic policy seen from a Buddhist perspective. No doubt the economic question is the more urgent one, impinging as it does on real-world suffering such as poverty, hunger, and inequality. Thus Part One is concerned to articulate the case that Buddhism has something of practical import to say regarding development that is humane and sustainable, and not merely endlessly profitable. Needless to say, neither part pretends to be exhaustive in its treatment. The book can certainly be

said to have exceeded its own modestly stated objectives to “inform readers of the on-going debate”(6) and to “inspire(...) future scholars to study in depth the many issues concerning Buddhism, Economics and Science” (7).

Part One begins with a summary statement of Buddhist Economics as conceived by E.F. Schumacher and reflected in the ensuing literature. Inspired by Gandhi’s “village economics”, Schumacher wanted to recast economic thought on a human scale, “as if people mattered”, coining the slogan, “small is beautiful.” Guruge also gives accounts of a limited selection of supporters and critics (G. and B. Alexandrin and J.B. Cobb are discussed, as well M. Skousen’s critique grounded on a more conventional economic principle of individual freedom). There follows a brief but informative survey, based on the Pali Canon and other early sources, of a variety of Buddhist principles and practices that bear on economic policy. The range of Buddhist ideas drawn into economic reflection is greatly expanded from the rather narrow and over-interpreted basis on which Schumacher and others rely. Guruge looks to Buddhist thought as a source of new economic ideas, but even more for normative guidance and potential validation of economic policy. But he rejects Buddhist Economics (understood as an ideology somewhere between capitalism and socialism) as an “idle” pursuit, and doubts that Buddha would have agreed that ‘small is beautiful’ (100).

It is not smallness of scale that is required, Guruge argues, but a limitation of desire. The Buddha is not anti-wealth, but against attachment to wealth, against certain ways of acquiring and using it. Wealth has advantages the Buddha does not overlook. Householders are enjoined to be two-eyed (one eye looking at accruing wealth, the other at spiritual development) rather than one-eyed or blind. While the Buddha is not known to have advised economic policy, employers are enjoined to treat employees in certain ways, including assuring health care. Rulers are urged to subsidize agriculture and provide wages and food for servants of government. Although there is virtue in “wanting the least” and being content with enough, poverty is not glorified, and hunger is seen to be an obstacle in the middle way. He sees poverty and indebtedness as suffering, and counsels saving and reinvestment. A rock edict of Aśoka is cited that commends spending and possessing little (presumably consistent with making much and giving it away).

Having surveyed ancient sources, Prof. Guruge next takes up the writings (in English) of authors more thoroughly steeped in Buddhist traditions, including two Thai monks Ven. P.A. Payutto Dhammapitaka and Phra Bhavanaviriyakhun, as well as J.W. Wickramasinghe (of Sri Lanka). Here one gets a taste of economic problems and priorities from a perspective informed by Buddhist ethical and spiritual principles, such as the law of karma, the elimination of *tanhā* or craving, *nirvana* as ultimate end, fear and greed as ignorance, nonviolence, and the cultivation of virtues such as truthfulness, restraint, self-sacrifice, and generosity. A small chapter on Pres. Nambaryn Enkhbayar of Mongolia's economic initiatives is left to represent the Mahayana tradition. In these discussions we find knowledgeable and fascinating perspectives on economic and development policy, all of which propose various ideal and normative constraints on the market and on what passes for economic growth. If the world is seeking principles of sustainable development, there is a rich trove of inspiration in Buddhist doctrine that suggests a middle way between socialist command economies and capitalist free markets. But, as the author is aware, these chapters, however refreshing and inspirational, remain largely idealistic, even utopian.

At one point (67), with interest but without further comment, Guruge quotes the observation of Phra Bhavanaviriyakhun that the "modern neglect of virtue and good character" is "traceable back to the work of Kant who was the first to 'invent' happiness as distinct from virtue". Perhaps there is some truth to this, since Kant's deontology downplays happiness as mere inclination, subordinates virtue to duty and the good to the right. But the problem in the West has an older lineage than is here asserted. The false separation of the two vexed Socrates, according at least to Clement of Alexandria who (referring to the now lost work of a 3rd cent. BCE Stoic) said: "Cleanthes, in his second volume on *Pleasure*, says that Socrates taught by individual instances that justice and happiness go together, and damned the man who first distinguished morality from expediency as blasphemous" (Miscellanies 2, 22). From this perspective, the problem is arguably not fairly laid at the door of the great deontologist and illustrious human rights theorist.

The rift between happiness and virtue even in the modern era might better be traced to the ethics of David Hume, to Adam Smith, or to de Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*. It is here one finds extolled the social benefits of private vice (like greed and selfishness). It is this inversion of values that is both key to modern market ideology and antithetical to

Buddhist (or even Socratic) virtue-based ethics. Greed and self-interest are either engines of growth or else ignorance to be overcome. It is hard to reconcile these without being anti-growth. There may be factual agreement between East and West about the pervasively vicious (*non-virtuous, anaryan*) character of human motivations, but there is wide normative divergence between happiness as extinction (*nirvana*) and the distributive grace of the invisible hand. This lends an unintended meaning to the author's conclusion that "It is idle to pursue a discipline or practice of Buddhist economics" (103).

This conclusion, supported by ancient sources and by the more learned interpretations of the Buddha's thought in relation to economics, is intended to deliver the reality check promised in the subtitle of Part One. But that also comes as an eventual shift in focus from normative theory to actual practice, from expressions of Buddhist ideals to the question of their implementation as social and economic policies. Guruge reaches as far back as Asoka and even the Buddha's own time, but special chapters are devoted to recent Buddhist-inspired initiatives, such as in Mongolia and the royal economic philosophies of Bhutan (Gross National Happiness) and Thailand (Sufficiency Economy). While the author does not presume to judge the effectiveness of these initiatives, hope is expressed that the Buddhist insights into desire, attachment, clinging and altruistic loving-kindness (*metta*) might provide guidance in inventing principled limitations on markets.

The time may be ripe for such considerations. The recent US housing bubble, subsequent international liquidity crisis, and now deepening global recession have given lawmakers the world over pause to reconsider the role of governments in economies. There was more than routine market greed at the root of this bubble, including but not limited to government pressure, poor policy, weak regulation, complicit oversight, an unscrupulous few and the lure of tremendous fortune. But with governments now taking equity positions in major financial institutions, assuming ownership of toxic debt, bailing out industries too important to fail, and undertaking vast infrastructure projects, all pretense of *laissez-faire* is over. While the allure of leverage will not be abated by moral teachings, governance of financial and real economies makes a great difference. Overregulation may be a perpetual threat, but regulation is as necessary to free markets as court systems and the rule of law. Inspiration for policy and ultimate aims in policy might just as well come from

Buddhist values as from any philosophy, be it socialist, liberal, Christian, humanist or what have you.

It is of particular interest in this connection that Thailand's sufficiency economy was a royal response to its own financial crisis in 1997. There too the corruption and greed of a relative few resulted in widespread economic pain. One might hope for lessons in the current context. But Thailand is currently caught in prolonged political unrest, related in part to issues of distribution and poor development. A sufficiency economy was supposed to reduce the impact of the boom and bust cycle. But it is one thing to curtail the excesses of wealthy investors, another to hold back rural development. A sufficiency mentality is not inclined to wealth redistribution, and yet is antithetical to consumerism. To what extent do the injunctions of restraint and self-sacrifice fall upon the under-developed and poor, even though it was not their own greed that stoked the financial crises to which the sufficiency ideology was a response? Are motorcycles and cell-phones in the countryside beyond the pale of sufficiency? Whose greed is the greater problem? As the current global financial crises becomes an economic crisis, and calls for belt tightening become the norm, the general counsel of restraint begins to show an *insufficiency* of compassion. Perhaps sufficiency is not enough.

Part Two of Guruge's book looks at the "similarities, parallels, and contact points" between Buddhism and science. Beyond this, it is hard to characterize Part Two in thematic terms. A remarkable diversity of topics are brought up, not all of them properly scientific. Questions are raised that pertain to: cosmology; particle physics; atomism; empiricism; scientific method; natural selection; laws of nature; causality and codependent origination; empirical evidence for the law of karma, and for rebirth; psychology; the effectiveness of Buddhist psychotherapy, or of mindfulness-based stress reduction program; neurophysiology of meditation; scientific confirmation of healing power of prayer; religion; faith; ethics and technology; Buddhist bioethics; and the list might be extended. The sheer diversity makes a point, but there is a consequent sacrifice of depth and analysis, even relative to the first part.

Thus, compared with Part One, the second part is both shorter and more extensive. It is more far-reaching yet less significant, more interesting and more disappointing, more dependent on facts yet less grounded in them. To some extent this is a reflection of the choice of figures. For example, there are relatively extensive chapters on early

figures, like Theosophist Henry Olcott, who considered Buddhism a “scientific religion” and “tantamount to a knowledge of other sciences,” and an early enthusiast, Paul Dahlke, who regarded science as inherently inadequate and Buddhism philosophically superior. Besides these early (one may say dated) authors, Guruge also covers some more recent efforts flawed by over-enthusiasm. To his credit, Guruge presents all their views charitably, but he also incisively points to intellectual errors, such as failure of objectivity and exaggerated claims of compatibility due to admiration for the Buddha. No small part of the value of the book is its critical stance, a clearing away of errors and inevitably faulty first attempts to integrate Buddhist and scientific thinking. Even when dealing with authors he is more evidently in sympathy with (such as the Ven. P.A. Payutto, to whose writings on the subject a long chapter is devoted) Guruge offers a moderating critique.

Overall, Guruge has produced a worthwhile book. Undoubtedly more enduring value attaches to Part One. Of Part Two, one may say that the extended focus on early and flawed efforts at least hands the reader a good excuse not to look further into figures who are now largely of historical interest. It is also a shame that more recent, extensive and interesting empirical research into the neuroscience of meditation are left out (it will suffice here to mention the names R. J. Davidson, A.B. Newberg and J. Iverson). Nevertheless, readers are unlikely to be led astray by either part and, as mentioned above, the book certainly achieves its stated objectives of informing readers and inspiring deeper interest in the important subjects it addresses.

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