

## ***Business and the Buddha: Doing well by doing good***

**Lloyd Field**

Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2007. 240 pp.

Reviewed by **Dave Valliere**

There is a growing awareness among policy-makers and social leaders of the limitations of economics as a tool for assessing and maximizing human well-being. From the proposal of Gross National Happiness measures to supplant traditional Gross National Product, to challenges to the assumed primacy of pro-growth objectives within traditional capitalist models, there is mounting interest in developing more inclusive measures of progress for society in general, and for business in particular. The current flowering of Buddhist thought in the West has provided a unique opportunity for engaging these needs and seeking ways in which Right Livelihood considerations can help guide business activity. Of all the dimensions within the Eightfold Path, however, Right Livelihood is the least explicitly prescriptive and, for many non-Buddhist managers, most in need of explication and application guidelines, such as Lloyd Field attempts to provide in his *Business and the Buddha: Doing well by doing good*.

This book is both an exploration into what Buddhism can teach about business success—its definition and attainment—within a broader social and moral context and an examination of the moral obligation of business as a force for positive global change. Field does not intend it as a repudiation of the success of capitalism, but as a call for a broader conception. As Field states, “Mine is not a cry for revolution, but for the direct integration of human values into our economic system.”<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, the text seems to be written for two groups: Western non-Buddhist business people looking for a more inclusive vision of business success and Western Buddhists trying to integrate their existing practice into their working and political lives. Field opens with a critique of the perceived social failings of profit-motivated capitalism, the implicit growth imperative, and Western economic hegemony. This is followed by a light and accessible introduction to basic principles of Buddhism and their relevance to business ethics. He then connects the two by drawing implications for goals and governance processes at many levels, including society, corporate leadership, management, and individual work behaviours.

The text is broadly encompassing in scope, with many examples ranging widely by industry, region, and culture that draw instructive parallels, such as between globalization and interpenetration and interdependence. The treatment of corporate governance and corporate social responsibility is especially interesting, although left somewhat disconnected from the relevant mainstream management scholarship in these areas. A wide-ranging selection of end-matter rounds out the text, including several very brief appendices, a glossary and an index. These could be improved, however, with a more complete selection of references and sources.

Although the book has many praiseworthy aspects, it also suffers some weaknesses. The most significant of its deficiencies is that it endeavors to achieve too much: explaining Buddhism, teaching skilful techniques (including basic meditation practice), critiquing current capitalist systems, developing social prescriptions, prescribing business and managerial practices, and providing simple templates and checklists for managers. Each ends up suggestive of a promising line of thought, but is treated a bit superficially. A more tightly focused and deeper treatment of fewer topics would be more successful.

Also, as with many management texts these days, many of the points are based on loose or tacit arguments and anecdotal evidence, and do not hold up to mindful consideration. For example, Field's implication that consumers of Kraft products are indirectly and immorally supporting Philip Morris cigarette manufacturers is wholly unsupported, and would need an examination of interdivisional capital flow from their annual report (or at least a citation to a valid study to justify the claim). It may well be that there are complex ethical issues hiding in the peanut butter, ones which Buddhist thought may help to address, but the case needs to be made much more clearly and rigorously to be compelling. Such loose reasoning appears repeatedly throughout the book.

Field also seems to take issue with the capitalist underpinnings of Adam Smith, in that he suggests that the lack of an individualist moral prescription perforce leads to immoral outcomes. When Smith famously wrote "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own self-interest," however, he was pointing out that a morally positive wealth creation system can arise even in the face of unenlightened, self-interested individuals. Smith might well argue against Field, saying that the invisible hand does good as an unintended consequence of individuals doing well, and that Buddhist influence is therefore superfluous. Unfortunately, Field does not engage this argument.

How does *Business and the Buddha: Doing well by doing good* compare to other books written for the same audiences? It tries to find a middle way between an inspiring socioeconomic call to action (e.g., E. F. Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*) and a pragmatic and immediately applicable guide for business managers (e.g., Geraldine Larkin's *Building a Business the Buddhist Way: A Practitioner's Guidebook*). It is certainly an interesting and timely topic, and the author ought to be commended for tackling it. Field has created a tasty appetizer, but one that left me still hungry for the meal. I expect this text will sell well on the basis of the cover and the title. The number of word-of-mouth referrals from actual readers, however, is likely to be much lower.

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<sup>1</sup> Field, Lloyd M., and Hsing Yun. *Business and the Buddha : Doing Well by Doing Good* (Minneapolis: Wisdom Publications, 2007), 176.