

Values, norms and poverty
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**RELIGIOUS VALUES AND THE MEASUREMENT OF
POVERTY:
A BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE**

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The Buddhist Goal

The ultimate goal of Buddhism is the conquest of the miseries of existence (*dukkha*). According to the teaching of the Buddha the first and foremost truth about life is the reality of unsatisfactoriness. This unsatisfactoriness has a cause and it can be overcome in this life itself. Through understanding and insight developed by following a Noble Path, perfect happiness of living can be attained here and now. This attainment has also the consequence of assuring the prevention of the possibility of any unhappiness hereafter. It is in terms of this teaching of the Four Noble Truths that Buddhism sought to offer a theoretical and practical basis of a philosophy of life.

According to the teaching of the Buddha a considerable proportion of human suffering is caused by the psychological roots of moral evil (*akusalamula*). Human suffering at all levels can be eradicated only by the destruction of these roots of moral evil, identified in Buddhism as greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*). The destruction of these roots of unwholesome motivation itself is considered as the goal of the Buddhist way of life, i.e. *Nibbana*. In considering the Buddhist perspective regarding religious values and the measurement of poverty, it is important to examine in the light of the above mentioned goal of Buddhism the relevance of a concern with poverty and its alleviation to the basis of its philosophy of life.

Suffering and Material Riches

According to the Buddhist diagnosis, the cause of suffering is the thirst for the pleasures of the senses (*kamatanha*), the thirst for becoming (*bhavatanha*) and the thirst for annihilation; the last mentioned being usually associated with hatred and destructive instincts (*vibhavatanha*). The thirst for the pleasures of the senses is the most potent drive which propels man to pursue material riches and the latter kinds of thirst are closely linked with the former. When material things become objects towards which an intense acquisitive drive is directed on the part of human beings these objects themselves can be characterized as *kama*, and such objects are the very cause of human suffering. They are therefore often compared in Buddhism to the flame of a torch carried against the wind, to a burning pit of embers, to festering sores of a leper. They involve much anxiety, but very little satisfaction.¹

The Buddha attached very little value to all the material riches that ordinary folk usually crave for. Those who are intent on attaining the supreme goal of Buddhism were expected to break off all physical connections and psychological attachment to such riches. The seeker after the supreme goal of *Nibbana* in Buddhism is one who breaks off all ties with material riches and takes up voluntarily a life of few wants (*appicchata*). The minimum needs of those who adopt a life leading to the eradication of greed, hatred and delusion are the four requisites prescribed for the Buddhist recluse: food sufficient to prevent the affliction of hunger and adequate to maintain the health of the body; clothing sufficient to appear socially decent and conducive to the

protection of the body from any harm from the natural environment; housing which gives sufficient safety and security conducive to one's serious engagement in the culture of the mind; and medicine and health care which cures and prevents disease.

Buddhism considered persons who renounce worldly possessions and adopt a life of 'poverty' by their own choice as belonging to the community of noble ones (*ariyapuggala*). The attitude of persons belonging to this noble community towards worldly riches is clearly reflected in the Ratthapala Sutta where the story of young Ratthapala who renounced all worldly pleasures much against the wishes of his wealthy parents and became a member of the *bhikkhu* community under the Buddha resists all attempts by his parents to attract him to the lower pleasures afforded by material wealth is related.ⁱⁱ His response to the attempt of his parents to tempt him with all the parental inheritance was that if they were to do what ought to be done with it they should dump it into the river Ganges because attachment to it is the root cause of suffering.

Poverty and Suffering, Spiritual Wealth and Contentment

According to Buddhism poverty involves suffering. As a philosophy of living which advocates the elimination of suffering, Buddhism does not value poverty. Buddhism values detachment towards material goods in commending having less wants as a virtue. Poverty, as ordinarily understood, consists in the non-possession of the basic material requirements for leading a decent life free from hunger, malnutrition and disease. Buddhism recognizes the importance of the fulfillment of the minimum material needs for a decent living, even in the case of the aspirants of its higher spiritual goal. Poverty, from this point of view does not involve the absence of an abundance of goods that stimulates the insatiable greed of man.

Therefore overcoming of poverty should not be understood as the proliferation of more and more desires and wants which are to be satisfied by more and more consumables produced. In this connection the important distinction between people's needs and people's wants should be recognized. The proliferation of wants may temporarily result in the elimination of poverty in the material sense but eventually lead to a different kind of poverty which is even more harmful to mankind than the one it has replaced. Buddhism considers the proliferation of wants as the cause of human misery. Therefore, from the Buddhist perspective poverty cannot be measured purely on the basis of the material criterion of the quantity of goods people consume.

While insisting on the importance of the fulfillment of the basic material needs Buddhism places a high value on the cultivation of the psychological attitude called *santutthi* (contentment). According to the teaching of the Buddha the greatest wealth is contentment (*santutthi paramam dhanam*)ⁱⁱⁱ

At this point it is pertinent to mention that Buddhism introduces a concept of noble wealth (*ariya dhana*). Buddhism recognizes seven types of noble wealth, namely (1) *saddha* (faith in wholesome moral qualities), (2) *sila* (morality), (3) *hiri* (shame to do an act which is morally reprehensible), (4) *ottappa* (fear to do an act which is morally reprehensible) (5) *suta* (learning which primarily leads to the development of one's moral personality and character, (6) *caga* (sacrifice involving the giving up of one's own possessions for the benefit of others) and (7) *panna* (insight into the three characteristics of all phenomena, their transient nature, their tendency to cause misery if one is greedily attached to them, and the absurdity of claiming an enduring ownership with regard to them.

By calling these moral qualities the noble wealth that a human being is capable of acquiring Buddhism draws attention to the fact that the single minded pursuit of material wealth is not going to make mankind ultimately happy or rich or free from poverty. Such a pursuit will only end up in a frenzy of greed.

A world in which envy (*issa*) and miserliness (*macchhariya*) predominates as the principle of social interaction cannot be considered as one in which poverty has been eliminated. *Issa* as explained in Buddhism is a psychological attitude which involves hatred and envy towards the possessions of others. This attitude becomes very intense when certain possessions are enjoyed by one section of the community while another section is deprived of such possessions and even the opportunity to acquire them. *Macchhariya* (miserliness) is the attitude which involves the selfish enjoyment of goods, guarding them greedily from any encroachment by others. According to the Buddha the breakdown of harmonious social relationships and the incidence of conflicts and wars in society can be explained by the presence of these psychological tendencies.^{iv}

Spiritual and Material Poverty

Buddhism seeks to eliminate both spiritual poverty and material poverty. It is because of this approach that Buddhism valued not only the happiness attained by man by the elimination of poverty in the material sense but also the happiness attained by man by the elimination of poverty in the spiritual sense. The Buddha speaks of four kinds of happiness attainable by persons who lead a household life, namely the happiness of possessing enough material resources (*atthi sukha*); the happiness of enjoying those resources; sharing them with those with whom one has close social ties (*bhoga sukha*); and the happiness of not being in debt (*anana sukha*). However, Buddhism insists that much more important is the happiness of leading a blameless life (*anavajja sukha*).^v

According to the Buddha some people are like the blind because they do not have the vision to improve their material conditions of living nor do they have the vision to lead a spiritually elevated life. There are others who are like one-eyed persons because, although they have the vision to improve their material conditions, they do not have the vision to live as morally elevated beings. It is the third class of people who have the vision to improve their material conditions in life as well as their moral well being who live like people possessing both eyes.^{vi}

Such Buddhist teachings imply that when measuring poverty it is not sufficient to measure merely the material conditions of living. For a more complete measurement of poverty it is necessary to measure the moral quality of people's lives. Buddhism maintains that the elimination of poverty in the former sense should merely form the supportive basis for the elimination of poverty in the latter sense. Any attempt to overcome poverty in the former sense as an end in itself would turn out to be a self-defeating exercise.

In the Anguttaranikaya the Buddha says that for the person who enjoys sense pleasures poverty (*daliddiya*) is miserable. Poverty leads to borrowings and borrowings lead to the piling up of debts. When one who is in debt is taken to task by the lenders it becomes a great suffering. Here, the Buddha says that in the discipline of the noble ones, the absence of faith in moral qualities, the absence of shame to lead an immoral life, the absence of fear to lead an immoral life, the absence of effort to cultivate moral qualities, and the absence of wisdom or insight to cultivate moral qualities may be called poverty. Such poverty is even more miserable than the poverty resulting from the lack of material resources.^{vii}

In keeping with the above concept of poverty Buddhism condemns all unrighteous means of acquiring wealth. Wealth must be acquired by righteous means, putting forth one's own effort, without using immoral and exploitative methods. In other words one's economic life ought to conform to the principle of right means of livelihood (*samma ajiva*). This is the reason why concerned Buddhists sometimes oppose programmes of poverty elimination proposed and implemented by development policy makers who disregard the cherished moral values of a Buddhist community. The promotion of economic activity involving injury to life in any form, or undermining the moral ideals of a society, however beneficial it is in economic terms, cannot be acceptable to one who values the Buddhist way of life. Any attempt to force such programmes on people who have preserved those values for centuries can have disastrous consequences on the moral fabric of such societies.

Causal Relationship between Material Poverty and Spiritual Poverty

While Buddhism recognizes the greater value of man's spiritual riches, it also sees a close causal connection between poverty in the material sphere of human living and man's ability to attain or preserve spiritual riches. What Buddhism maintains is that there is a reciprocal relationship between the two kinds of poverty. When any section of human beings are deprived of the basic material needs due to an unjust economic order, there is a natural tendency towards the moral degeneration of a society.

This is clearly illustrated in the Cakkavattisihanada Sutta and the Kutadanta Sutta. According to Buddhism, social unrest and moral degeneration in a society are indications of the growth of poverty. The Kutadanta Sutta points out that any society in which the material needs of certain sections are not adequately met, and they are oppressed, exploited and marginalized, they tend to resort to criminal behaviour.^{viii} The enforcement of penalties will not be effective in reducing crime in a society where such poverty prevails. It shows how the creation of full productive employment for all sections of the community to enable them to earn a living according to their skills and aptitudes results in a social order free of conflict, crime and rebellion. People in such a community lead happy and contented family lives with a full sense of security leaving open the doors of their dwellings. The Cakkavattisihanada Sutta shows how when people in authority neglect certain sections of the community and let poverty increase, there occurs a gradual and systematic deterioration of morality in society until society is totally brutalized. The culmination of such deterioration is said to be a catastrophic war which leads to the destruction of millions of lives.^{ix}

These Buddhist stories effectively illustrate the causal interrelationship between the two kinds of poverty referred to above. They also show that in measuring poverty it is not possible to adopt a purely quantitative measurement. Where there is no fair distribution of material wealth poverty surfaces in the form of social unrest and moral degradation.

In the Sigalovada Sutta the Buddha speaks of the harmonious relationship that should exist between sections of a community that perform different roles. Here the Buddha speaks of the people who function as labourers and workers. He insists that the relationship between the masters and the workers should be such that there develops mutual regard and respect towards each other. The workers form one important section of the society towards whom other sections of the society owe important duties. In this instance the Buddha calls it a way of worshipping each other, for dignity is attached to the role that the labourer is performing.^x

Quantitative and Qualitative Measurement

If poverty cannot be measured in quantitative terms alone, and the moral quality of the life of the people has to be taken into account in the measurement of poverty, then it becomes necessary to pay due attention to the value bases of a society in any poverty alleviation programme. All quantitative measures may indicate that poverty has been reduced. But the reality of the situation may be something else. The overcoming of poverty in this quantitative sense appears to be the mark of the consumerist culture that is spreading into most parts of the world. But if it becomes more and more evident that people eventually become more greedy, more competitive, more selfish, less caring for the need of the other and less compassionate can it be validly maintained that they have become less poor? Or if they have become totally oblivious to what is meant by contentment is it proper to claim that they have become richer?

From the Buddhist point of view the elimination of poverty needs to be demonstrated by the establishment of a society free of crime, social tensions, wars and conflicts where people can live in harmony, friendship and peace. The quality of life of a community that possesses not even a fraction of the goods possessed by a so-called affluent community may be far superior to that of the latter. For the abundance of material goods does not necessarily correspond to an abundance of human happiness.

- i. Majjhimanikaya (Pali Text Society, London) Vol.1, p.132
- ii. Ibid. Vol.II, p.64
- iii. Dhammapada. Verse 204
- iv. Dighanikaya (Pali Text Society, London) Vol. II, p.276
- v. Anguttaranikaya (Pali Text Society, London) Vol. II, p.69f.
- vi. Ibid. Vol. I, pp.128-129
- vii. Anguttaranikaya Vol. III, p.351
- viii. Dighanikaya Vol. I, p.185
- ix. Ibid. Vol. III, pp.65-74
- x. Dighanikaya Vol. III, p.191

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- ⁱ Majjhimanikaya (Pali Text Society, London) Vol. I, p. 132.
 - ⁱⁱ Ibid. Vol. II, p. 64
 - ⁱⁱⁱ Dhammapada, Verse 204
 - ^{iv} Dighanikaya (Pali Text Society, London) Vol. II, p. 276
 - ^v Anguttaranikaya (Pali Text Society, London) Vol. II, p.69f.
 - ^{vi} Ibid. Vol. I, pp. 128-129
 - ^{vii} Anguttaranikaya Vol.III, p. 351
 - ^{viii} Dighanikaya Vol. I, p.135
 - ^{ix} Ibid. Vol. III, pp. 65-74
 - ^{xx} Dighanikaya Vol. III, p. 191

**RELIGIOUS VALUES AND THE MEASUREMENT OF POVERTY AND PROSPERITY
A BAHÁ'I PERSPECTIVE**

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Broadening the conceptual framework of development

The processes of change now shaping human affairs portend an inevitable transition to a global society. A major challenge inherent in this transition is creating conditions of social and economic equity among and within the nations of our global community. Lifting the burden of poverty from the world will require a deep moral commitment and a fundamental reordering of priorities. But perhaps most importantly, the materialistic criteria now guiding development thinking must give way to a new conceptual framework that explicitly acknowledges the spiritual, cultural, and social forces that define individual and community identity. In this regard, the World Faiths and Development Dialogue held at Lambeth Palace in February 1998 and similar initiatives examining the roles of religion and spirituality in advancing human well being represent important contributions to the discourse on social and economic development.^x

Over the past several decades workers in the development field have gradually become cognizant of the complexity of the development process. This evolution in development thought can be seen in the shift in focus from capital-intensive programs aimed at promoting industrialization, to programs emphasizing health care, new agricultural methods, traditional technology and environmental preservation, to initiatives promoting participation and community organization. Yet, despite this growing awareness of the many interrelated factors underlying development, the international development agenda continues to be governed by a limited set of assumptions and approaches that fail to take into account much of what has been learned.

It is clear that another dimension of complexity must now be incorporated into the development equation. Attention must now be focused upon that which lies at the heart of human purpose and motivation: the human spirit. In the Bahá'í view, nothing short of an awakening of the human spirit can create a desire for true social change and instill in people the confidence that such change is indeed possible. While pragmatic approaches to problem solving obviously play a central role in development initiatives, tapping the spiritual roots of human motivation provides the essential impulse that ensures genuine social advancement. When spiritual principles are fully integrated into community development activities, the ideas, values, and practical measures that emerge are likely to be those that promote self-reliance and safeguard human dignity, thus avoiding patterns of dependency and progressively eliminating conditions of gross inequality. Broadening the development process to take into account people's spiritual perceptions and aspirations represents an essential step toward creating the conditions necessary for global stability and prosperity.

Role of religious beliefs and values

Through the teachings and moral guidance of religion, great segments of humanity have learned to discipline their baser propensities and to develop qualities that conduce to social order and cultural advancement. Such qualities as compassion, forbearance, trustworthiness, generosity, humility, courage, and willingness to sacrifice for the common good have constituted the invisible yet essential foundations of progressive community life. Recognition and cultivation of humanity's spiritual nature have ennobled and enriched the lives of peoples everywhere, and have engendered cohesion and unity of purpose within and across societies.^x True civilization does not arise merely from material progress, but rather is defined by and based upon the transcendent values that hold society together. Religion, then, in a very real sense provides the bricks and mortar of society – the shared beliefs and moral values that unite people into communities and that give tangible direction and meaning to individual and collective life. "In truth," Bahá'u'lláh avers, "religion is a radiant **light** and an impregnable stronghold for the protection and welfare of the peoples of the world ... Should the **lamp** of religion be obscured, chaos and confusion will ensue, and the **lights** of fairness and justice, of tranquillity and peace cease to shine."^x

Individual progress and community development require both spiritual awareness and material resources. Material advancement is, therefore, best understood not as an end in itself, but rather as a vehicle for moral, spiritual, and social progress. Meaningful social change results not so much from the acquisition of technical skills as from the development of qualities and attitudes that foster cooperative and creative patterns of human interaction. In short, the material and spiritual aspects of daily life are inseparably connected and must both be addressed.

This understanding of development anticipates the emergence of communities in which the application of spiritual values such as justice, trustworthiness and kindness will enhance material well being. At the same time, material resources and advances will make possible new avenues of spiritual endeavor that will promote both the development of individual potential and the collective good.

Religion, Science and Capacity Building

How then can spiritual principles be infused into our understanding, practice and assessment of development? The challenge is not a new one. Throughout past decades, development thinkers

have repeatedly encountered issues related to values and beliefs. Too often, however, they have backed away from a thorough examination of the subject.

If the development discourse is to address properly the issue of values, a rigorous dialogue will be required between the work of science and the insights of religion.^x Such a dialogue is crucial to the enterprise of building human capacity, an enterprise that is increasingly recognized as the fundamental purpose of development. When viewed as capacity building, development is concerned principally with the generation, application, and diffusion of knowledge. If it is accepted that knowledge is both spiritual and material, religion and science can be understood as two interacting knowledge systems that provide the fundamental organizing principles by which individuals, communities and institutions function and evolve.^x Placing the generation and application of knowledge at the center of development planning and implementation makes it possible to study the practical implications of religious values, including the role that such values have in alleviating poverty.

It is generally accepted that the materially poor must participate directly in efforts to improve their own well being. But the nature of that participation has yet to be fully explored. From the Bahá'í perspective, this participation must be substantive and creative; it must allow the people themselves access to knowledge and encourage them to apply it. Specifically, it is not sufficient for the people of the world to be engaged in projects as mere beneficiaries of the products of knowledge, even if they have a voice in certain decisions. They must be engaged in applying knowledge to create well being, thereby generating new knowledge and contributing in a substantial and meaningful way to human progress.^x

The ability of any group to participate fully in its own development process depends on a wide range of interrelated capacities at the personal and group level. Among the most important are the capacities to participate effectively in the planning and implementation of development activity; to use methods of decision-making that are non-adversarial and inclusive; to think systematically about problems and search for solutions; to deal efficiently and accurately with information rather than respond unwittingly to political and commercial propaganda; to take initiative in a creative and disciplined manner; to make appropriate and informed technological choices; to organize and engage in ecologically sound production processes; to contribute to the effective management of public programs and projects; to promote solidarity and unity of purpose, thought, and action; to replace relationships based on dominance and competition with relationships based on reciprocity, collaboration, and service to others; to interact with other cultures in a way that leads to the advancement of one's own culture and not to its degradation; to encourage recognition of the essential nobility of human beings; to put into place and to participate in educational processes conducive to personal growth and to the transformation of society; to maintain high standards of physical, emotional and mental health; to imbue social interaction with an acute sense of justice; and to manifest rectitude in private and public administration.

Incomplete as it is, this list is suggestive of the constellation of capacities necessary for building up the social, economic, and moral fabric of collective life. The list highlights the vital role of both religious and intellectual resources in promoting development. It also points us to the types of indicators that might provide useful insight into the overall well being of communities.

Measuring Poverty and Prosperity

If development is primarily a process in which individuals and communities become the principal actors in promoting their own physical, spiritual and social well-being, how can it be measured? Is it even reasonable to expect to be able to measure an ongoing process of action, evaluation, and adjustment: one in which communities gradually improve their ability to define, analyze, and meet their own needs? In the Bahá'í view, the answer is *yes*. While concrete action in any project should be directed toward visible, and therefore measurable, improvement in some aspect of life, the capacity of a community to address development issues at increasingly higher levels of complexity and effectiveness can also be measured, although perhaps not by traditional means.

One vital measure of a community's progress is the extent to which participation and cooperative methods of decision-making are used to guide the development process. As an illustration, Bahá'í development activities have, from their inception, emphasized collective decision-making and collective action at the grassroots level. Improvement in the ability of all the members of a community to consult is a primary measure of success in every Bahá'í development project. Both the process and the outcomes are observable and, therefore, in some way measurable. The use of consultative methods of decision making can lead to novel solutions to community problems; they can result in greater fairness in the distribution of community resources; and they tend to involve and uplift those who have historically been excluded from decision making, such as women and minorities. Experience has shown that consultation enables communities to sustain and modify development initiatives, contributing, thereby, to self-sufficiency and a higher quality of life. The ability of people to come together in these new and constructive patterns of participation and interaction is, in some respects, a more important outcome – and, therefore, more important to measure – than the quantifiable goals traditionally associated with development projects.

Development initiatives might be assessed on the basis of concrete application of a number of spiritual principles to individual and community life: among them, unity in diversity; equity and justice; equality of the sexes; trustworthiness and moral leadership; and independent investigation of truth. While these are by no means the only principles to consider, these five contain a sufficient diversity of concepts to allow a broad overview of community progress. In their full expression, these spiritual precepts capture many of the intangible factors that conduce to social and economic advancement.

For example, the principle of unity in diversity as applied to the area of education could lead to curricula that foster concepts of tolerance, understanding, compassion and world citizenship. The principle of the equality of women and men could lead to policies that unlock capacities of both women and men that have been hitherto suppressed. The principle of the independent investigation of truth as applied to development projects could ensure that problems are correctly identified and defined and that solutions reflect the true needs of the people involved. A detailed discussion on how these principles might form the basis of tangible indicators of development can be found in the concept paper, "Valuing Spirituality in Development: Initial Considerations Regarding the Creation of Spiritually Based Indicators for Development." This paper was presented by the Bahá'í International Community to the World Faiths and Development Dialogue at Lambeth Palace in 1998.

The creation of broad qualitative measures of development progress will have direct implications for the types of projects that get funded. Experience has shown that innovative projects are often deprived of needed funding when evaluation formulas emphasize a few specific economic or physical parameters. For example, before pursuing income-generating activities, it may be more important to first engage in goal setting and consultations regarding community needs and well

being. The adoption and application of rigid evaluation criteria cannot be considered scientific especially if they prematurely prescribe optimal outcomes. In a given community or cultural setting, there may, in fact, be a variety of pathways that could achieve the same material ends while promoting other goals such as social cohesion or moral development.

Clearly the design and evaluation of development projects must give consideration to a broad set of parameters that go beyond simple categories of economic performance. Conventional indices of such factors as economic growth, health, or education are capable of conveying only a very narrow snapshot of community well being. The most important indicators of successful development activity might well be whether the views and talents of all members of a community are utilized, whether consultative processes are used to formulate and implement community projects, or whether an atmosphere of dignity, optimism and commitment characterizes the lives of the people involved. Although such qualitative factors may, at first, prove difficult to measure, the participants in development endeavors will no doubt be able to assist development specialists in creating meaningful benchmarks that take account of these qualitative variables.

In the final analysis, the measurement of poverty and prosperity, can best be determined by those who are most directly affected. Certainly, traditional measures can offer valuable insights and can be used to help identify where resources should be deployed, but by themselves they are insufficient. Existing development indices fall far short of bringing into relief the essential spiritual and social dimensions of life, so fundamental to human welfare. Without a way to identify and track these essential elements of prosperity, our development efforts will continue to be dictated by mainly material considerations and true progress will prove to be illusory. It is, therefore, not only timely but critical that organizations of civil society and religious communities be engaged with development agencies in charting new measures of social progress.
