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Sufficiency Economy and Santi Asoke: Buddhist Economic Ethics for a Just and Sustainable World

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Abstract

Mainstream economic thought and practice has resulted in widespread socioeconomic disparity and environmental devastation in all corners of the world, unmitigated by a multi-billion dollar development industry informed by these same economic models. To reverse this trend, the dominant forms of economic thought and practice must be reunited with ethics that are more caring of the human-nature base. Such ethics may be found in alternative economic models based on religious, spiritual, environmental, or feminist values. This essay considers one such alternative: Buddhist economics. After outlining a theory of Buddhist economics, this essay considers two models: the Royal Thai Sufficiency Economy Model and the approach adopted by the Santi Asoke Buddhist Reform Movement of Thailand. Both are conducive to economic activity that is more socially just and environmentally

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sustainable, particularly due to their ethics of self-reliance, moderation, and interdependence.

Introduction

Ecofeminist Vandana Shiva asks the pointed question: What should be the objective of the global economy: freedom of trade or freedom for survival? If the latter, changes are necessary in our conception of economics. Mainstream economic thought and practice has resulted in widespread socioeconomic disparity and environmental devastation in all corners of the world, unmitigated by a multi-billion dollar development industry informed by these same economic models. To reverse this trend, the dominant forms of economic thought and practice must be reunited with ethics that are more caring of the human-nature base. Such ethics may be found in alternative economic models based on religious, spiritual, environmental, or feminist values. This essay considers one such alternative: Buddhist economics. Although Buddhism is principally concerned with individual enlightenment, it offers guidelines for householders' economic activities that give rise to a more environmentally sustainable and socially just way of being in the world.

After outlining a theory of Buddhist economics, this essay considers two models: the Royal Thai Sufficiency Economy Model and the approach adopted by the Santi Asoke Buddhist Reform Movement of Thailand. The Sufficiency Model, which operates on the principles of moderation, reasonableness, self-immunity, wisdom and integrity, was publicly introduced by the King of Thailand following the 1997 economic crisis and is now championed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The Sufficiency Model has succeeded in fostering well-being at the individual, firm, community, and regional levels across rural and urban sectors and shows promise for national policy due to its ability to coexist with other (that is, capitalist) economic strategies. The Asoke Model is not as likely to propagate so widely: its seven intentional communities aim to release material attachment and attain spiritual freedom, and in doing so, the movement exhibits ascetic tendencies and a biting critique of capitalism. This spiritual emphasis is what lends the Asoke Model its explicit social and environmental ethics, not shared by the materially focused Sufficiency Model. Less directly, they are both conducive to economic activity that is more socially just and environmentally sustainable due to their ethics of self-reliance, moderation, and interdependence. Although a thorough discussion of potential shortcomings and implications is not possible here, the conclusion offers a few points for further consideration.

Buddhist Economic Ethics for the Individual

Buddhist economics and mainstream Western economics are not as radically opposed as suggested by their stereotypes, the monk and the stockbroker. Like its Western sibling, the Buddhist model is based on individual rational choices concerning material wellbeing. The accumulation of wealth is allowed, and in many cases even encouraged. Significant differences emerge, however, upon closer examination of economic objectives, productive activities or work, and attitudes toward wealth—particularly how to consume and disperse it.

Although economic objectives in both Buddhist and mainstream Western models involve satisfying self-interest through rational choice, these concepts hold different meanings in each perspective. The enlightenment era "Economic Man" model based on the neoclassical theory of methodological individualism presents an atomistic individual using instrumental or means-to-ends rationality, calculating choices of comparable value to arrive at the optimal outcome: maximization of self-interests, whether for profit or some other form of satisfaction. But a Buddhist version of this model (call it the Rational Buddhist Householder) based on the theory of conditionality or dependent origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*) and the law of causality looks a bit different. The

Buddhist sense of self is connected to other entities rather than being isolated, and an individual's actions have consequences arising in a non-linear fashion, possibly resulting in a *kammic* boomerang. This undoubtedly expands an individual's notion of "self-interest." As such, where the neoclassical Economic Man's rational process stops at satisfying a demand, the Rational Buddhist Householder would first factor into his or her choices the possible effects on all spheres of human existence: individual, society and nature (Payutto *Economics* 37).

Readers who think that worrying about *kamma* is irrational are urged to reconsider their basis of rationality. Sociologist Max Weber distinguished two kinds of rationality: formal or instrumental rationality (on which Economic Man is based) and substantive or value rationality, which constitutes acting in accordance with one's values or that which is intrinsically valuable, perhaps of an ethical, aesthetic or religious nature. Economic anthropologists such as Gudeman and Rivera further argue that rationality is contextually dependent. Take for example a woman on her way to the market who refuses to sell her heavy load to a foreigner offering more than the market value; she may be perceived as behaving irrationally until one considers that she places greater value on long-term social relationships with market trading partners than a one-time monetary gain.

Mainstream Western and Buddhist models also differ in their objectives of achieving wellbeing and the desire that stimulates efforts toward that aim. Although the former promotes material wellbeing for its own sake, the latter considers it a necessary condition for the ultimate goal, *nibbāna*. That is, in Buddhist economics, the provisioning of basic material needs—food, shelter, clothing and medicine—serves as the foundation for human spiritual advancement. With this minimum material comfort as its objective, it may seem that there is scant motivation to be productive. The capitalist economy, after all, is driven by desires, and Buddhists are supposed to rid themselves of this source of suffering. Yet Buddhism distinguishes between two kinds of desires and views only one negatively. *Taṇha,* the subject of the Second Noble Truth, is ignorant craving for pleasurable feelings associated with both the tangible and intangible such as status or fame, whereas *chanda* is positive desire for wellbeing and benefit. It is based on *pañña* or intelligent reflection and leads to right effort and action. A Buddhist would argue that economic activity can and should be prompted by this form of desire—and possibly by the more specific desire to turn money into merit (Payutto *Economics* 34).

To satisfy such desires, an individual must perform some productive or livelihood activity. E.F. Schumacher, the first Western scholar to explore this subject, observed that because the Eightfold Path included right livelihood, "there must be such a thing as Buddhist economics" (56). Right livelihood is guided by *chanda* and allows the individual to keep the five basic householder precepts (to abstain from killing or harming life, lying, stealing, engaging in sexual misconduct, and consuming sense-altering substances). Right livelihood also requires diligence, an important Buddhist virtue captured in the Buddha's last words, "work out your own salvation with diligence," and in the Buddha's directives for householders to achieve happiness in the present lifetime: diligent acquisition, followed by careful conservation, having virtuous friends and living within one's means (*Anguttara Nikāya* IV 281). Finally, implicit in the notion of right livelihood for the householder is self-reliance. Because Theravāda Buddhists technically cannot look to an array of gods or celestial *bodhisattas* for help, they must make their own way in this life. The Buddha even counseled that followers should not blindly accept his teachings, but prove their truthfulness for themselves. In terms of material self-reliance, householders must meet their own subsistence plus generate enough surpluses to support the monastic community that depends on them.

Yet, work may be more than just the means to satisfy material needs. Some Buddhist schools and sects, most notably Zen, define work as an opportunity to practice *samādhi* or meditation. Concentration prevents distractions, thereby allowing people to work more efficiently and carefully with fewer mistakes and accidents. Ideally, they can also work together more harmoniously by controlling thoughts, feelings, speech and action according to the Eightfold Path. In theory, as individuals' mental states improve, so too does the quality of their work and social interactions.

When most Buddhist householders work, however, they simply receive a paycheck and may even accumulate wealth, just like their capitalist counterparts. The Buddha did not forbid wealth as long as it was gained according to *dhammic* norms (for example, through right livelihood). In fact, according to Sizemore and Swearer, Buddhists may perceive wealth to be favorable for two reasons. First, wealth is a sign of virtue because it is partly a result of good *kamma*. That is, wealth accumulated through right livelihood is good; therefore, it is a suitable reward for meritorious actions. Second, surplus wealth is necessary to make more merit or good *kamma*.

Wealth accumulation is not so much the issue for Buddhists as is what happens afterwards. Along with the benefits of wealth come increased potential for attachment to money, material goods and the resulting status as well as the craving for more. With this in mind, the Buddha specified five uses of wealth: to provide for oneself and one's family, to share with friends, to save for emergencies, to make the fivefold offerings (to relatives, guests, the departed, the government and the deities) and to support spiritual teachers and monks (*Anguttara Nikāya* III 45). Of these, two uses warrant further consideration: personal consumption and giving.

Although a monk's personal consumption is certainly minimal, the Buddha did not advocate deprivation. As noted above, material well-being is necessary for spiritual advancement. Moderation is a better approach to consumption, because it is in line with the teachings of the Middle Way of neither extreme luxury nor extreme asceticism. The question of what is sufficient—not merely to sustain life but to give a sense of wellbeing—is to be continually re-evaluated by each individual at different levels of spiritual attainment. The aim, though, is to consume less.

Assuming a steady rate of diligent wealth accumulation (and no debt), reduced consumption permits greater opportunity for giving. This is desirable not simply because generosity is a householder virtue, but because giving allows Buddhists to practice non-attachment to material objects and possessive feelings; it is training in selflessness, non-self or *anattā*. According to Phra Rajavaramuni, an esteemed Thai scholar monk, lay training in Theravāda countries emphasizes religious giving or charity (*dāna*), in addition to morality (*sīla*) and mental development (*bhāvanā*) as the three bases of meritorious action (rather than higher monastic training in *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*). Phra Rajavaramuni suggests the stress on giving has to do with lay concern for good social relationships, whereas other scholars such as Gutschow point to the reciprocal relationship between monasteries and households: material support flowing one way (that is, donations to temples) and spiritual support flowing the other to create the optimal conditions for salvation.

From the lay perspective, however, giving may simply be the easiest way to earn merit, the currency of spiritual wealth, which can be viewed as an investment for a better future in this lifetime and an even better rebirth. The Rational Buddhist Householder wanting to maximize spiritual wealth must choose among "fields of merit" for the best return. According to the hierarchical concept of *dāna*, the more noble and accomplished the recipient, the higher the field of merit. And, of course, the more one donates, the greater the merit, such that funding the construction of a new temple ranks higher than giving daily alms to monks. Although the doctrinal definition of *dāna* as religious giving is rather narrow, in practice many "socially engaged" Buddhists aim to benefit the wider community of monastics and lay people as well as their environment. This approach to giving may be inspired by the ideal individual characteristics, known as the Four Sublime States: goodwill (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇa*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*).

The two case studies that follow, the Royal Thai Sufficiency Economy Model and the Santi Asoke Buddhist Reform Movement of Thailand, point to what this Buddhist economic theory might look like in practice.

Case Study One: The Royal Thai Sufficiency Economy Model

The King of Thailand first publicly introduced his "New Theory," later known as Sufficiency Economy, in his annual birthday address to the nation on December 4, 1997, following the onset of the economic crisis. To speed recovery from such a blow after decades of seemingly unstoppable growth, the King advised a change in mindset: "To be a tiger is not important," he declared to those who aspired to attain recognition as the "Fifth Tiger" among the East Asian miracle economies. "The important thing for us is to have a self-supporting economy. A self-supporting economy means to have enough to survive" (as cited in Senanarong 4). The King did not intend for his subjects to revert back to traditional subsistence living or otherwise deprive themselves. Instead, as he had explained in a much earlier speech:

> Development of a nation must be carried out in stages, starting with the laying of the foundation by ensuring the majority of the people have their basic necessities through the use of economical means and equipment in accordance with theoretical principles.

> Once a reasonably firm foundation has been laid and in effect, higher levels of economic growth and development should be promoted. (HMK's graduation address at Kasetsart University in 1974 as cited in ORDPB 1)

The King had made other such statements throughout the years to limited avail. Finally, when Thais across the county faced mounting debt and mounting disillusionment with neoliberal capitalism, if not financial ruin, the King's philosophical and practical approach to development started to make much more sense.

The King's "New Theory" was in fact not new but the culmination of decades of observation and experimentation. Beginning in the early days of his 60-year reign, he regularly toured the Thai Kingdom to see firsthand how his people were living. From the 1960s onwards, the King noted that small farmers, rather than benefiting from the modernization spreading rapidly through the country, were bearing a heavier burden of the costs. As industry replaced agriculture as the sector of choice and large agribusinesses began to squeeze out family farms, economic disparity and social and environmental conditions worsened. Then, when the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) advised structural adjustment in the late 1970s (in response to an economic downturn compounded by the global oil crisis), uneven growth was exacerbated both geographically and socially. Disparities in wealth and wellbeing grew not only between urban settings—namely Bangkok—and rural areas, but also between the "haves" (elites) and "have-nots" in each area. Following the 1997 economic crisis, income disparity in Thailand increased even though the economy's annual growth rate recovered.

Regarding environmental conditions, the impact of economic development in Thailand has been devastating. Widespread pollution is an obvious repercussion, as is rapid resource depletion. This occurs not through extraction alone, but through complex development-related processes. For example, deforestation in the North has resulted from legal and illegal logging, encroachment by marginal farmers due to increased immigration and population growth, and the expansion of large-scale commercial agriculture. The immediate environmental effects of unchecked economic growth have further consequences: deforestation triggers erosion of fertile topsoil and drought, which in turn causes surface and groundwater to dry up. These environmental costs are born by the majority of Thais who depend on an agricultural livelihood, causing the social divide to widen further.

In response to such problems, the King formulated his alternative development approach and set up centers to experiment with agricultural techniques that would cultivate a comfortable existence for the rural population. Publications by the Office of the Royal Development Projects Board and the United Nations Development Programme describe how the centers provided knowledge and demonstrations of diversified farming that aimed to meet the needs of the family first; only after setting aside what was needed to continue production could leftovers be sold on the market. As the surplus of individual holdings grew, the farmers were encouraged to set up networks to produce and exchange their goods more efficiently. Although the King's New Theory for Agriculture managed to germinate in the poorest region, Isan, it failed to spread its roots due to the prevalent preference for "modern" development and all its trappings.

In the aftermath of the economic crisis, Thais across the country were reevaluating their nation's development path and considering alternatives, particularly Buddhist-inspired ones. Thus, after the King's 1997 birthday address advocating the Sufficiency Model, governmental working groups, most notably the National Economic and Social Development Board, immediately set to explicating and codifying the King's ideas into a workable policy framework. What emerged was a set of decision-making guidelines to advance mindful human development first at the individual- and firm-level, and then, when stable, branching out into networks or communities of specialized production and distribution units and other relevant entities such as savings cooperatives and seed banks. At the same time, the newly articulated Sufficiency approach was sufficiently broad to be applied to nations and the global economy as well. These guidelines, simultaneously Buddhist and pragmatic, include three components—"moderation," "reasonableness" and "self-immunity"—with "wisdom" and "integrity" as necessary conditions.

The UNDP Thailand Human Development Report 2007, titled *Sufficiency Economy and Human Development*, gives a concise "monarch-approved" definition for these concepts. "Moderation" is the quintessential Buddhist notion of the Middle Way, signifying not too much and not too little, suggesting frugality. "Reasonableness" should not be confused with the narrow neoclassical economic conception of rationality. It involves analyzing reasons and potential actions and grasping the immediate and distant consequences of those actions; it also implies compassion. "Self-immunity" does not refer to self-isolation but rather to self-reliance and self-discipline as well as the ability to withstand external shocks and cope with uncontrollable events. A required condition for these components to operate effectively is "wisdom," which embodies not only accumulated knowledge, but the insight to put it to judicious use. The second required condition is "integrity," meaning virtuous or ethical behavior including honesty, diligence, and non-exploitation. The emphasis in these guidelines is clearly on mental development, apropos of Buddhism.

The UNDP report describes several Thai enterprises that illustrate these Sufficiency Model principles, including a mulberry paper business established over 40 years ago by a single individual, Fongkam Lapinta. When she began, Fongkam's handmade paper production was small scale, relying on nearby natural resources, family labor, and local markets. She kept her costs low at first out of necessity but also on the principle of self-reliance. As her business gained success, she refused loans offered by banks, preferring a moderate growth rate commensurate with her accumulation. There were times she had to turn away large orders until surplus funds allowed her to invest in expansion, but what she sacrificed in potentially higher short-term profits, she gained in long-term stability. Her investments focused on internal development, including employee training, diversification of product design, and technological innovations to increase productivity and to improve employee and environmental wellbeing (such as experiments with natural dyes to eliminate harmful chemicals). Now, Fongkam's handmade mulberry paper company, known as Preservation House, has 400 employees and exports 80 percent of its products around the world.

Although familiarity with Buddhism would allow deeper insight into the Sufficiency Model principles, it is not necessary for the model to function successfully. Fongkam's commitment to moderation in both consumption and aspirations for wealth certainly correspond to the Buddhist Middle Way, but they could also be identified by generic economic terms such as thrift and risk aversion. Her concern for employees and the environment could reflect her Buddhist rationality of a dependent self embedded in its larger social and natural milieu and her wisdom and integrity to act ethically. Or it may be explained as more accurate accounting of externalities, with efforts to minimize external costs for the long-term health of her company. Finally, although self-reliance is emphasized in the Buddhist economic model, the practice of meeting needs without running a deficit makes sense even in a capitalist economy like the U.S., which is currently suffering from the collapse of overextended housing credit (among other ills). The Sufficiency Model finds its strength in its compatibility with capitalism; that is, an individual, firm, or national economy could adopt this model of ethical economic activity regardless of religious or philosophical beliefs and still perform comprehensibly within the context of global capitalism. This is possible because the Sufficiency Model's focus is firmly material, intending to improve the physical wellbeing of humans and nature. The next case study in Buddhist economics is ultimately more concerned with the spiritual realm.

Case Study Two: The Santi Asoke Buddhist Reform Movement of Thailand

In the Santi Asoke Buddhist Reform Movement of Thailand, the aim is not a Western ideal—to accumulate high levels of material comfort—but a Buddhist ideal—to release attachment to the material world and attain spiritual freedom. The Asoke group diverges from mainstream lay Buddhist practice by rejecting the worship of Buddha images, practicing strict morality (including vegetarianism in accordance with the first precept to abstain from killing), and emphasizing everyday work as meditation. Moreover, the Asoke Movement issues a biting critique of capitalism—particularly the prevalence of greed, competition, and exploitation—as the root of Thai society's problems. In their view, modern "social preferences" influenced by the global flow of Western culture and capitalism exacerbate human suffering and the ruin of nature. To counter these forces, the Asoke Movement proposes meritism or *bun-niyom*, Asoke's unique economic model based on Buddhist and Thai values. The fact that the seven Asoke communities thrived throughout the 1997 economic crisis and continue to do so is a testament to meritism's success.

Ethnographic research for this study (Essen *Right Development*) was conducted at Srisa Asoke Buddhist Center, an intentional community established the purpose of practicing Buddhism. Like other Asoke communities, the organization of Srisa Asoke could be called collective or cooperative. The 80 permanent residents (including 7 monks) volunteer for jobs that (ideally) match their interests and skills while fulfilling community needs. This labor is non-wage, but not uncompensated. In return, residents receive spiritual guidance and support and the four necessities for a comfortable material existence (food, shelter, clothing, and medicine), as well as free education and a positive environment for their children. Although a few residents maintain private houses, money, and vehicles, most give up all ownership to the collective and equally share the common resources.

Srisa Asoke and other Asoke communities are organized around the principles of meritism, specified in the slogan "Consume Little, Work Hard, and Give the Rest to Society." The slogan's intended ideas are expressed by Ah Kaenfa, the administrative leader of Srisa Asoke:

> We have a principle philosophy that we here must eat little, use little, and work much. The leftovers support society. This is sacrificing to society—the part that is left over. We do not accumulate. Accumulation is sin. Therefore, we stipulate that we will come to be poor people in the view of people in the other world. The other world is the system of capitalism, that must have much money, much property....We will be people who do not have property. But we will be people who are hard working and industrious, who have knowledge, efficiency, capability. We will have great diligence but we will not accumulate—we will spread it out to other people.

This slogan is not empty rhetoric but is enacted daily by Srisa Asoke residents in countless ways. First, residents limit consumption by adhering to the Buddhist precepts (at least the five basic householder precepts but often up to ten), sharing communal resources (for example by cooking, eating, and watching TV together in the Common Hall), and following a Western environmental edict, "The Four Rs": recycle, reuse, repair, reject. Many residents who reflect on their practice of consuming little show an appreciation for balance and the relation between the spiritual and material worlds. Deeply concerned with the root defilement, greed, Asoke members value *mak noi*, "to be content with little." Yet they caution to consume enough, following the Buddhist Middle Way of neither extreme asceticism nor extreme luxury. A second idea members put forth in combination with *mak noi* is *sandood*, "to be satisfied with what one has," in accordance with the Buddha's revelation that desire causes suffering. One member explains "Being content with what one has is important because if (what you have is) enough, you are richer, suddenly richer." Thus, reducing consumption decreases suffering in economic matters—a significant fact for the average indebted Thai.

As for the slogan's second component, Asoke members work hard most obviously because they must support themselves. Many Srisa Asoke members do so through the meritism version of right livelihood, the "Three Professions to Save the Nation." These professions—natural agriculture, chemical-free fertilizer, and waste management—form a circuit in which organic waste is composted as fertilizer for the crops, which people then eat, the remains becoming fertilizer again. According to Asoke members, these professions will "save the nation" for many reasons: (1) everyone must eat; (2) agriculture is better suited for Thailand's climate and environment than industry; and (3) with these professions, people can be self-dependent. The Three Professions are certainly appropriate for the Northeastern region populated by impoverished farmers. On a broader level, the concept resonates with national calls for self-reliance in protest against the IMF's 17.2 billion dollar bailout loan after the 1997 crisis as well as the growing interest in the King's "sufficiency economy" model.

Equally significant, work serves as the Asoke Model's primary method of meditation. The common image of Buddhist practice is sitting still with eyes closed, monitoring the breath, but this is only one method of meditation. Several Srisa Asoke residents commented that the peace generated by meditating in isolation is lost as soon as one reenters the world. Asoke members thus practice "open eye" meditation continuously as they work and interact with others within their community. Following the original meaning of the Thai word for work, *gnan* (formerly, "all life-related activities"), the Asoke group includes working for one's livelihood as well as attending meetings, chanting, eating, watching movies, and chatting with neighbors in their understanding of work. Although many residents confessed it is difficult to maintain full consciousness 100 percent of the time, they do their best to develop general awareness, a calm mind, concentration on tasks and interactions, and control of feelings such as anger, jealousy, aversion, and pleasure throughout their daily activities. In a concrete way, individual practice in hard work contributes to community development by providing food, shelter, clothing, medicine, and other material needs. Moreover, as Asoke members increase their concentration and awareness of thoughts, speech, and actions, the quality of their work and social interactions improves. Signs of good meditation at Srisa Asoke are the lush gardens, well-built structures, clean streets, and relatively congenial social relations.

The third component, "Giving the Rest to Society," is training in selflessness or non-self, the pillar of Buddhism. Giving to make merit is a common practice for Thai Buddhists, yet Asoke Buddhists don't just give the typical temple offerings. The Asoke Movement aids material and spiritual development in Thai society through many means; for instance, they run vegetarian restaurants and non-profit markets that simultaneously provide the Thai public with healthy food and useful goods at low cost while promoting the concepts of meritism. The most time-, energy-, and resource-intensive, outwardly oriented activities, however, are free trainings in the Asoke way of life. Hundreds of visitors come to Srisa Asoke each month for either an afternoon tour or a four-day seminar. The seminars, called "Dharma Builds People; People Build the Nation," teach ordinary Thais specific knowledge and skills in the area of (Asoke) Buddhist morality and occupation, particularly the Three Professions.

With its spiritual emphasis, the Asoke Model exemplifies the Buddhist economics theory more closely and completely than the Sufficiency Model. Whereas the motivation of the Sufficiency Model's economic activity is solely to satisfy material wellbeing, in the Asoke Model, it is unmistakably *chanda*, namely the desire for enlightenment. Regarding the theory's second component, livelihood or work, the Asoke Model fits the specifications in two ways the Sufficiency Model does not: the Asoke Model articulates appropriate occupations (the "Three Professions" in particular), and it treats work as meditation, a path to enlightenment. The two models share similar attitudes towards wealth in terms of moderate consumption, but the Asoke Model alone requires the giving of surplus. In its merit-making outreach, the Asoke Model better illustrates the Buddhist rational approach to expanded self-interests. To underline the spiritual focus of the Asoke Model, the abbot of the Santi Asoke Buddhist Center in Bangkok pointed out that if people come for purely economic reasons, they come for the wrong reasons and soon leave. So although its ultimate goal of enlightenment makes the Asoke Model a more fitting model for Buddhist economics, it also means that it is less likely than the Sufficiency Model to proliferate. During research for this study, many non-Asoke Thais expressed their feeling that the Asoke Movement's austere way of life, although laudable, is too difficult for the average Thai and simply does not lend itself to urban living. Moreover, the Asoke Movement's unequivocal critique of capitalism forces an either-or relationship: according to Asoke rhetoric, to embrace meritism, one must reject capitalism. Still, it is instructive to examine both models for the social and environmental ethics they may offer.

Social and Environmental Ethics

Before analyzing the Sufficiency Model and the Asoke Model for possible social and environmental ethics, the debates over whether Buddhism embodies such ethics must be acknowledged. Regarding social consciousness, many scholars maintain that Buddhism, with its focus on individual salvation, evokes no social responsibility. Sociologist Max Weber maintains that "universal compassion is merely one of the stages sensitivity passes when seeing through the nonsense of the struggle for existence of all individuals in the wheel of life, a sign of progressive enlightenment, not however, an expression of active brotherliness" (213). Yet the writings and actions of socially engaged Buddhists, such as those highlighted in Queen and King's edited volume, *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia,* point to the contrary. A prime example is "development monks" who organize and lead community development projects in their villages in response to identified needs.

A similar debate has transpired around the question of Buddhist environmental ethics. At one extreme, scholars such as Hakamaya reject the possibility "on the grounds that the otherworldliness of "canonical" Buddhism implies a negation of the natural realm for all practical purposes" (as cited in Harris 1). Others, like Schmithausen, are more hopeful that some elements of Buddhism could contribute to a sound natural environment, although they do not establish nature as a value in and of itself. Yet proponents such as Susan Darlington counter that most negative arguments have not examined the conscious efforts of Buddhists to become actively engaged in dealing with environmental crises. For example, Jim Taylor illustrates how many forest monks in Thailand have become environmentalists out of necessity, as their tradition quickly recedes with the nation's forests. Although most forest monks tend to have an instrumentalist perspective of nature (that is, the forest is a conduit for *dhamma*), Buddhadasa identified *dhamma* with nature, such that the destruction of nature is the destruction of *dhamma* itself (Santikaro 159). Leaving aside the intellectual arguments, the Venerable M. W. Thero points out that the Buddha distinctly expressed concern for the environment when he advised householders to accumulate wealth as a bee collects nectar from a flower—without destroying the flower.

Just as Buddhists have done throughout history, modern engaged Buddhists simply adapt their scriptural interpretations and practices to fit a changing sociopolitical and natural environment, thereby legitimizing the distinct ethics that may result. The Asoke Model offers prime examples of explicit environmental and social ethics informed by both formal and substantive rationality. Through "The Three Professions to Save the Nation," the Asoke Model demonstrates a pragmatic ethic to preserve the environment on which they depend directly for their material existence through chemical-free agriculture. Their adoption of the Western environmental edict, "The Four Rs," also reflects an instrumental ethic because these practices help them minimize consumption, a means to achieve *anattā*. Yet their appreciation for nature's inherent value also suggests a substantive ethic. One monk at Srisa Asoke explained their complex outlook, referring to the forest residents planted years ago:

> Asoke people try to construct and develop the environment to give rise to abundance and wholeness, in order to bring about thriving soil, sincerity, wooded shade, soft breezes, beautiful views, richness in goodwill, energy to work, joyfulness in *dhamma*, [a sense of] the profoundness of *kamma* and bad deeds, the five *khandhas* [form, feeling, perception, volitional impulses, and consciousness], doing what is natural.

Such sentiments, emerging not just through need but through mindful reflection, give rise to a more profound ethic that endures regardless of nature's immediate use or exchange value.

The Asoke Model similarly manifests a social ethic that is simultaneously instrumental and substantive. The group's emphasis on giving refutes Weber's assertion that Buddhism evokes no social responsibility, yet the motivation for this ethic requires further analysis. At first glance, Asoke members' eagerness to help others could be explained by compassion or *karuṇa*, one of the Sublime States and a universally recognized Buddhist ethic valued for its own sake. However, during months of conversations with Srisa Asoke residents, *karuṇa* was referenced infrequently, whereas *bun* (merit) or *tombun* (merit-making) came up several times a day. Because the accumulation of merit buys a better rebirth and ultimately enlightenment, Asoke members' impetus to give is more likely instrumentalist. Nevertheless, their efforts to propagate the Asoke way of life through training seminars, boarding schools, and markets for the public, although merit-making activities, are also inspired by a genuine desire to improve people's lives. From this perspective, Asoke members are indeed compassionate even if they don't label their actions so.

First ethic: self-reliance

Even without specific intent, both Buddhist economic models may indirectly contribute to social justice and environmental sustainability through other ethics they share. The first is the ethic of self-reliance. Self-reliance implies a livelihoods approach to economic activity, which can be more caring of the human-nature base than a growth-oriented one. Countless scholars, activists, and practitioners take issue with the development industry's tendency toward what Herman Daly calls "growthmania"—its blind faith in economic growth to bring about prosperity. Mounting evidence indicates that macroeconomic strategies implemented to foster economic growth, such as export production and trade liberalization, are not designed with the welfare of ordinary people in mind and frequently have negative effects on the poorest. The environmental consequences of this type of development are equally concerning, as exemplified in the case of Thailand.

Despite this critique, some in the development industry do aim to improve the wellbeing of individuals and communities by fostering self-reliant livelihoods. Development practitioners Robert Chambers and Gordon Conway do so particularly by enhancing people's capabilities, improving equity, and increasing sustainability. The first component, "capabilities," refers to what a person is capable of doing and being. According to Nobel Prize recipient Amartya Sen, "What people can positively achieve is influenced by economic opportunities, political liberties, social powers, and the enabling conditions of good health, basic education, and the encouragement and cultivation of initiatives" (*Freedom* 5). This suggests a holistic approach to human development—body, mind, and spirit—that is touched on in the Sufficiency Model (such as Fongkam's investment in employee training and healthy working conditions) and is precisely the purpose of Asoke's alternative way of life. The second element, equity, may be defined in terms of relative income distribution (another of Sen's concerns) or more broadly, equal distribution of assets, capabilities, and opportunities. In theory, this would be the result of the Sufficiency Model if the whole kingdom adopted the King's philosophy; in practice, Asoke's cooperative organizational model tangibly demonstrates this aspect. Lastly, successful self-reliant livelihoods require both social and environmental sustainability. Social sustainability is the ability to cope and recover from stress and shock, which is central to the Sufficiency Model concept of self-immunity, as well as provide for future generations. A livelihood is environmentally sustainable when it maintains or enhances local and global assets on which livelihoods depend, like the Asoke Model's Three Professions, and has beneficial effects on other livelihoods.

Implicit in the self-reliant livelihoods approach is an emphasis on needs. Although "'need' is a non-word" for the mainstream economist (Illich 88), it wasn't always this way. When the discipline of economics was first conceived, its focus was fulfilling basic needs and enhancing quality of life; yet as the field aspired to be recognized as a positivistic science, it turned away from its moral attention to such fundamental issues (Sen *Concept* 10). Feminist economists with interests in improving social and environmental conditions advocate a return to these early concerns, just as Buddhist economic models would do. Julie Nelson for one favors an economy that concentrates on the provisioning of human life, on the commodities and processes necessary to human survival. Following Georgescu-Roegen, Nelson includes "purposeful activity" and "enjoyment of life" within the realm of human needs. Yet like Buddhists, Nelson would differentiate between needs and wants. Although the line is not distinct, she maintains, "One can certainly say that a Guatemalan orphan needs her daily bowl of soup more than the overfed North American needs a second piece of cake. A refusal to recognize such a distinction...leads to an abdication of human ethical responsibility" (33). Thus, the ethic of self-reliance, nurtured through needs-based livelihood development, has the potential to be less exploitative of humans and nature. But it must be accompanied by the ethic of moderation.

Second ethic: moderation

The ethic of moderation is of critical importance to combat the excessive consumption and materialism that has proliferated with the global spread of capitalism. The Asoke Movement undeniably holds this belief given its denunciation of capitalist greed and drive to consume little. The Sufficiency Model, although less extreme in rhetoric and action, also promotes this ethic as the basis for social, economic, and environmental sustainability. On one level, moderation relates to individual wellbeing. When Thai social critic Sulak Sivaraksa was asked after the 1997 economic crisis how middle-class Thais could live happily, he spoke plainly about excessive consumption:

> You are suffering because you think you are. In truth, the middle-class continue to have three meals; half of the world population go to bed without having eaten. The middle-class must know that it is the lower-class that supports them. Eat the cheaper food that these urban poor sell on the streets and save your money too. However bad the economy is, you'll never die. You may get less pay and receive no bonus, but spend(ing) 10 or 20 baht for a meal is enough. People feel they are very much affected because the economic system makes them feel that way. You have to stop drinking expensive wines, buying imported clothes, and eating expensive food. For me, those things are extravagant and you should not have adopted them in the first place. Now they become your burden by making you feel that your life is getting worse, which is not true. (Bangkok Post, November 16, 1997)

Ajaan Sulak argues that "modern social preferences" skew people's perception of wellbeing. If instead the middle-class could perceive "how they have been manipulated by consumerism and materialism," they could easily do without luxury items and have a more carefree life (Bangkok Post, November 16, 1997). This is precisely why Asoke urges *sandood*, "to be satisfied with what one has." Thus, individuals may fulfill Buddhism's primary objective to reduce suffering by reducing desire and keeping moderation as their mantra.

Beyond individual wellbeing, moderation's ability to curb the harmful effects of over-consumption has much larger significance for environmental sustainability as well as for social justice, albeit less directly. Development scholar Rajni Kothari declares, "We have more than enough empirical evidence that the destruction of the biosphere lies first and foremost in the wasteful lifestyles of the world's privileged groups and that the problem of poverty emanates from this same source" (34). A connection can certainly be made between the demand for teak furniture and the degradation of old growth teak forests in Thailand or the desire for cheap electronics and the establishment of Export Production Zones in developing countries where TNCs have no environmental or health regulations. Deep ecologist Arne Naess concurs that the degree to which "life conditions of the planet" are degraded is highly dependent upon social lifestyles, adding that the effort to reduce degradation demands individual discipline and habit changes. Through the power of the consumer, as individuals or collectives, the ethic of moderation has the greatest potential to positively affect the human-nature base.

Third ethic: interdependence

For moderation's larger implications for a just and sustainable world to be realized, an ontological shift is necessary: capitalism's individualism must be replaced by the notion of an interdependent self. This concept can be interpreted in two ways: (1) all living things are dependent on each other for existence (theory of conditionality or *paṭicca-samuppāda*); and (2) an individual's choices and actions reverberate throughout one's social and natural environment, both locally and globally (law of causality or *kamma*). Such interdependence is implicit in the Sufficiency Model's conception of self-immunity, particularly its emphasis on creating networks, and is acted upon in the Asoke Model's intentional, cooperative communities and through its explicit environmental and social ethics. Because Asoke members strive to be as self-sufficient as possible—for example, by growing their own food and making their own natural soaps and medicines—they immediately experience the realities of interdependence, resulting in heightened awareness of their social and environmental footprint.

The difficulty in stimulating such awareness in a modern capitalist context is that consumers are typically far removed from the locus of production of most household goods. Feminist economist Helga Moss discovered this first hand when she attempted to trace the history of a particular commodity from its beginnings to the point at which it reached her. Through the process of constructing an exceedingly complex model, Moss reflects that "[I] gained an understanding of my profound ignorance regarding my/our relationship to nature in any concrete sense. I am—to use Maria Mies's expression—delinked from nature and people as producers of the things I use to live" (241). This is just the kind of awareness that the Sufficiency Model's ethic of reasonableness promotes, as does the Asoke Model's more concrete efforts to help others and conserve the environment on which they directly depend. Although these Buddhist models are informed by *paṭ icca-samuppāda*, awareness of the interdependence of all things can arise irrespective of doctrinal affiliation. It can be cultivated through observation and reflection and a commitment to pursue the common good.

Concluding Considerations

There is much to celebrate in terms of Buddhist economic ethics that are more caring of the human-nature base. However, there is also cause for concern: the ability to empower all members of society to achieve well-being may be hampered by structural inequalities that are not addressed in the inherent hierarchy of the Asoke Model and the Sufficiency Model's philosophical underpinnings—Theravāda Buddhism—and the context in which they are implemented. Theravāda Buddhism has been particularly discriminatory towards women, even in a modern Buddhist nation such as Thailand where women continue to encounter injustice in all sectors. In the development context, gender disparity harms not just women but their families and communities. For example, with the assumption in both patriarchal societies and standard neoclassical economic theory of a male household head, aid is more often distributed to men despite mounting evidence that women allocate greater proportions of their incomes to everyday subsistence. To deal with such potential to reproduce inequality, applications of Buddhist economics must be savvy to contextual relations of power and be accompanied by a suitable theoretical and practical framework for social justice.

The good news is that Buddhist economics has the capacity to deal with this possible shortcoming through wisdom and integrity, the foundational conditions of the Sufficiency Model. Environmental sustainability similarly benefits from these mental conditions because it cannot be achieved in the western world without a fundamental change in perception of self-interests from individualism to interdependence. The ultimate strength of the Sufficiency Model, the Asoke Model, and other Buddhist economic models (that is, over mainstream economic development models) is their emphasis on mental development, most clearly illustrated by Asoke members' practice of *samādhi* or open-eye meditation. Through this process, individuals continually reflect on the world around them and their relation to it, gain insight from the knowledge they glean, and act on that knowledge in an ethical manner.

One last point for consideration is that although concerned scholars, practitioners and global citizens may find Buddhist economic ethics quite appealing, this essay does not suggest facilely replacing the dominant neoliberal economic model with a Buddhist one. Instead, economic pluralism is advocated, consisting of the myriad approaches to material and social wellbeing that are culturally and environmentally appropriate. In fact, Buddhist economics's core condition of mental development presupposes such an approach. This is essential for a vital global economy because, quite simply, different problems require different solutions. Nevertheless, actors in community, national, and global economies might learn from alternative economic models so that we may achieve not merely universal freedom to survive, as Shiva hopes, but universal freedom to be well.

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