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**The Relational Economy:  
A Buddhist and Feminist Analysis**

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# **The Relational Economy: A Buddhist and Feminist Analysis**

**Julie A. Nelson**

## **Introduction**

*If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him.*

This much-cited adage from 9<sup>th</sup> century Zen master Lin-Chi is a key Buddhist warning about nonattachment. Like so many Zen sayings and koans, it can surprise and unsettle us. It reminds us that even our highest ideals, goals, and aspirations are not something we can cling to. If we think we've finally "got it," that is a sure sign that we do not, and it's back to the meditation cushion for us.

In spirit of opening discussion, let me offer a variant on this instruction:

*If you meet capitalism on the road, kill it.*

Some contemporary Buddhist commentators seem to suggest that one should meet this system and slay it as an enemy, but that is not the meaning intended here. Rather, if you think you've met capitalism, and understand its essence, I recommend applying the Zen lubricant of great doubt. And here is another variant:

*If you meet a locally-grown, organic, communal lifestyle on the road, kill it.*

This one may strike closer to home, because there is a substantial movement among Western Buddhists, and other who seek a more just and sustainable world, to idealize just this kind of economic life. Lin-Chi's adage, however, shows it no mercy either.

This is not at all to deny that the world is in great need of economic transformation. Poverty and oppression continue to reign in many places, and in some are even getting worse. Species are becoming extinct, waters and lands are becoming polluted, and the negative effects of climate change are falling most harshly on those with the fewest resources to cope. Our scientific cleverness has in many ways outstripped our collective wisdom and level of social development, leading to dangerous developments in areas such as nuclear technology and genetics. All of these problems are closely linked to economic activities, as we rush to produce and consume, enmeshed in an increasingly global network of economic ties. Like Kuan Yin (Avalokiteshvara), when we open our hearts we "hear the cries of the world." Buddhist teaching suggests that there is an important difference, however, between reacting to these cries in a habitual way, and responding to these cries in a wise and compassionate way.

One habitual reaction among Western commentators, I argue, manifests as an overly abstract and conceptual diagnosis of economic problems, which in turn is based on particular beliefs about what constitutes a "scientific" analysis of economic life. Words and concepts are, of course, necessary for thinking and communication. If we grasp the concepts with the hands of emptiness, the concepts work for us. But if we let ourselves harden around them, holding onto them with hands of certainty, they harden us,

reinforcing our sense of ego and separation. Oddly enough, even concepts of sharing and communalism can—it will be argued below—become fixations, arising out of our desire to feel good about ourselves and be in control. I believe that if we want to walk the Middle Way, we cannot cling to concepts, even these ones.

In the social activism literature authored by many Western Buddhists, a deep understanding of Buddhist philosophy is often shown. But it is, unfortunately, accompanied by a relatively shallow understanding of economic life. This is understandable, as the sort of conventional understanding demonstrated is both widely popular and endorsed by most professional economists. While I hold a Ph.D. and a position as an economics professor at a U.S. university, my studies of feminist scholarship have led me to look critically at conventional economic theories. My views are also influenced by my studies and practice as a student in the Boundless Way Zen Sangha. Feminism provides one lever for breaking open old, dogmatic beliefs, revealing their delusional nature. Buddhism can further help keep us from building up rigid new delusions out of broken-up old ones.

### **Can a Buddhist be a Capitalist?**

Widely available English-language writings on the topic of Buddhism and economics seem to be characterized by one or the other of two very different attitudes towards economic life. One, drawing from historical Buddhist teachings in primarily Asian and pre-industrial contexts, takes a largely positive view of commerce as long as a person who has wealth has rightly earned it and rightly uses it. The other, in which a modern and Western influence is considerably more apparent, is suspicious of economics at a "systemic" level, and takes an antagonistic stance towards contemporary corporations and markets.

Peter Harvey, in *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, for example, gives examples of the more positive case. He points to the teachings of the Buddha described in the *Samyutta Nikāya*:

1. As to how wealth is *made*, it is praiseworthy to do so in a moral way (in accordance with *Dhamma*), without violence, and blameworthy to do the opposite.
2. As to *using* the product of one's work, it is praiseworthy to use it:
  - (a) to give ease and pleasure to oneself;
  - (b) to share it with others, and to use it for generous, karmically fruitful action.Correspondingly, it is blameworthy to be miserly with oneself or mean with others.
3. Even if wealth is made in a moral way, and used to benefit oneself and others, one is still blameworthy if one's *attitude* to one's wealth is greed and longing, with no contentment or heed for spiritual development (2000, 187)

Writing from a Japanese context, banker Sinichi Inoue writes that Buddhist teachings in his country have often displayed "an ethical, but positive view of moneymaking"(Inoue 2002, 51). His Holiness the Dalai Lama has said that, properly motivated, a person can become "a good and honest businessperson" (Dalai Lama 2002, 133). Some Buddhist teachers even portray Buddhism as enhancing business success (Harvey 2000, 189). For example, "On a personal level, if you practice tolerance and compassion...you will also become a better and more effective businessperson..." (Dalai Lama 2002, 134). Zen priest Norman Fischer writes that,

"In the end, commerce is communication, a way of being together, transacting, each of us helping the other to fulfill our human needs. Thirteenth-century Japanese Zen master Dogen says in his essay 'Bodhisattva's Four Methods of Guidance': 'To launch a boat or build a bridge is an act of giving...Making a living and producing things can be nothing other than giving.' I know that it is possible for us to engage in commerce as an act of participation and compassion--to buy and sell in that spirit. Through the process of spiritual practice, we can cultivate a view of material things that appreciates them for what they are in themselves and recognizes in them an opportunity for meeting each other on the ground of our shared human needs." (2005, 221-222)

These writings suggest that one can follow Buddhist teachings right in the midst of commercial life, which is considered to be profoundly relational and laden with ethical dimensions and human meaning.

The more antagonistic attitude claims that the nature of our contemporary economic system—sometimes identified with exchange and markets in general, while at other times identified with "global corporate capitalism"—puts it at distinct cross-purposes with spiritual development. Questions about the morality of individual businesspeople become largely irrelevant to these discussions, since the problem is said to have its source at a different analytical level—that is, with "the system" itself. "Our present economic system institutionalizes greed," writes Zen scholar David Loy (2008, 89), and "Today it is arguable that our economic system is based upon stealing...because corporate globalization is commodifying the whole earth" (2003, 37). Author and activist Helena Norberg-Hodge argues, in her essay "Buddhism in the Global Economy," that localism is the correct antidote to a "corrupt" "global economic system built of technology and corporate institutions" (2002, 19, 26). Zen scholar and activist Ken Jones writes of "the structural violence of transnational free market capitalism" (2003, 159). "Corporatization depends on greed, delusion, and hatred..." claims noted Thai intellectual and activist Sulak Sivaraksa (2002, 136). Robert Aiken (my own Zen great-grandfather) has written that "Stealing...is the nature of our economic system"(Aitken 1984, 29).

Now, it could be that the difference between these two quite different attitudes is simply due to inescapable historical developments. It might be argued that an emphasis on individual transformation and morality was sufficient for the pre-industrialized societies of the past, but that current conditions demand that Buddhists take a different,

systemic, approach. It may seem that—just as Buddhism has made numerous cultural adaptations as it moved from its birthplace in South Asia to East Asia, Southeast Asia, and more recently Europe, the United States, and elsewhere—it is necessary to now to adapt Buddhism to a new economic reality.

While plausible, I believe that the idea that this new antagonism is just an appropriate response to changing circumstances is, in fact, misleading. What has primarily happened, instead, I argue, is that Buddhist social thought has taken on some unnecessary Western cultural baggage.

### **The Concepts We Harden On**

Many Buddhist writers on economic issues begin with the experience of meditation, of getting beyond the dualities of self and no-self, and speak a message of radical interdependence, peace, compassion and engagement. The energy of this discussion is open-hearted, immediate, and joyful. But when the conversation turns to economic systems, the antagonistic writers repeatedly assert that the contemporary economic system is radically impersonal and non-relational. It is claimed that economies are things entirely set apart from societies, and from the sorts of ethical norms and behaviors relevant to social life. The sort of system envisaged is not an organic system encompassing change, impermanence, and evolution, but rather a locked-up system, that—once set in motion—runs along automatically according to its own rules.

One can see this belief reflected in the frequent use of imagery of machines, engines, and physics-like logic, laws, or calculations. "Undeniably, the *fuel* that keeps the capitalist engine running is profit," writes Sivarksa (2002, 135, emphasis added). "Large corporations are new forms of *impersonal* collective self," writes Loy (2008, 88, emphasis in original). "Profitability and growth are becoming increasingly important as the *engine* of the world's economic activity," he continues, and "the system has attained a life of its own" (2008, 88, 90, emphasis added). Jones, in a section on transnational corporations, describes capitalism as a structure or system driven by "the *logic* of the market" (2003, 162), while Santikaro refers to "the *calculations* of the market" (2005, 206).

The assumption of non-relationality is also reflected in metaphors of territory, whereby social or religious life is said to belong to one sphere, while economic life belongs to another realm, set off by "boundaries" or "confines" (Santikaro 2005, 204, 206). Personification is often used as well, treating capitalism as a distinct and permanent entity that acts on the world on its own behalf, and which possesses an essential "nature" (Aitken 1984, 29).

Because commerce is identified with non-relationality and greed at an unavoidable, "systemic" level, a cascade of dualistic understandings results. If we believe that "laws" of profit maximization and competition are at the core of this corrupt system, then we must look towards non-profit, cooperative, communal, and solidarity-oriented

behavior for salvation (Watts and Loy 2002, 99-100). If we believe that large, global institutions are bad, then we must believe that small, local institutions are good (Norberg-Hodge 2002, 101; Watts and Loy 2002, 100; Loy 2003). If we believe that technology or economic development is bad, then we have to idealize rural and pre-industrial societies (Loy 2002; Norberg-Hodge 2002). If we believe that people have become growth-hungry consumers, then, well, we can't accept people as they are, either: Jones argues that we will need a "new breed" of people to inhabit a better world (2003, 172).

Notice that—in spite of the Buddhist teachings about non-duality and impermanence—the tone of the energy behind the writings has suddenly changed. As abstractions and the image of a mechanical economy enter in, an "us" gets defined, and a "them." There arises an energy of resistance to what *is*, and we are directed to think of what could be, if only the "system" were different or people were different. The machine must be "dismantled" (Jones 2003, 161-2), it is believed, in order to make right livelihood possible.

The unnecessary Western belief which these writings have assimilated is *the belief that the current economy is a non-relational, a-social machine*. I know that there are strong pressures that encourage this belief: In some social milieus, if one questions it one is likely to be considered "soft on capitalism," or unsophisticated in one's understanding of economics, or insufficiently committed to economic justice.

But at this point, however, I suggest that we take a breath and relax for a moment. Can we loosen our grip, just a bit? Can we entertain—just for a moment—the possibility that capitalism might be something other than a (poisonous) machine? Where did the idea of the-economy-as-machine come from, anyway?

### **Where These Concepts Came From**

The dominant Western, scientific understanding of our physical and economic worlds takes them to be fundamentally mechanical, nonrelational, and de-sacralized. As a number of feminist scholars of history and philosophy of science pointed out during the 1980s, this reflects certain dualistic understandings that lie deep within Western philosophy and culture (Easlea 1980; Keller 1985; Harding 1986). Rationality, autonomy, detachment, mind, and quantitative analysis, for example, all have masculine cultural associations. Meanwhile, emotion, interdependence, connection, daily care of bodies, and the qualitative aspects of phenomena have all been commonly regarded as more feminine. The masculine-associated qualities have been elevated, in much of culture, while the feminine-associated ones have been thought of as of lesser worth, or even feared. Scientific knowledge, since the Enlightenment, has been envisaged as helping men achieve rational control over a previously threatening and wild "mother nature."

It is critically important to note here that these associations are about *cultural stereotypes*, not about differences between actual men and women. Feminists often make a distinction between "sex" and "gender," wherein "sex" is used to refer to biological

differences between males and females, while "gender" refers to cultural beliefs constructed on the base of (preponderant) sexual dimorphism.<sup>1</sup> So the issue is not whether men, for example, have more rationality or less emotion than women: They manifestly do not. Rather, the point is that there is a deep cultural pattern of defining male as being dichotomously different from, and superior to, female, and defining minds as being radically disconnected from, and superior to, nature, matter, and emotion.

So early European Classical economists of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, excited by the invention of science and by the Industrial Revolution, were the first to introduce the metaphor "the economy is a machine." Soon thereafter came an aspiration to make the discipline of economics into a science itself, along the lines of physics or geometry. Contemporary mainstream economics—centered around what is called the "neoclassical school"—continues to manifest this physics-envy this with a vengeance.<sup>2</sup> Central to the mainstream view is the idea that economies are made up of impersonal markets populated by autonomous, self-interested, rational individual agents—a creature often referred to as "economic man." What is crucial to note, however, is that these views were *not* adopted because they best described the behavior of people or firms as actually observed—whether in the 18<sup>th</sup> century or now. Rather, they were adopted because they best allow the use of mathematical methods, and therefore best reinforce a notion of economics as a "hard" and masculine science.

Note, then, that the notion of "economic man" is doubly gendered—and hence doubly biased. First, in leaving out all aspects of human life having to do with bodies, emotion, dependence, or other-interest, it highlights only culturally masculine-associated notions of humanity, while blocking out consideration of feminine-associated ones. Not only are the occupations of feeding, cleaning, and nursing bodies (traditionally assigned to women) made invisible, but *everyone's* experiences of social life in general, and of dependency in childhood, illness, and old age in particular, are denied. In Buddhist terms, "economic man" elevates the autonomous "self" to a concrete entity, radically denying codependent origination.

Secondly, the origin of, and continued allegiance to, "economic man" reflects the impact of a gender-biased view of scientific endeavor, which prioritizes mathematical and abstract thinking, and denigrates qualitative analysis or delving into concrete aspects and particulars. In attempting to achieve "scientific" status, the discipline of economics has, ironically, instead fallen into dogma. A certain biased methodological view has led to a dogged allegiance to the assumption of self-interested agents and mechanical markets.

And the problem is not just with academic economics. We economists have done a good job *teaching* you that people are self-interested (greedy) in our economic lives, that firms have no choice but to profit-maximize, and that the economy does not evolve, but rather runs like clockwork according to universal laws. The neoclassical notions of an impersonal, mechanical system has saturated the popular image of economic life in the West—even among many Buddhist scholars.



## Some Notes on Actual Economies

A more immediate, sensory, and empirical examination of economic life, however, leads to quite different conclusions. We do, indeed, live in an economic system—but one that is *far* more complex and impermanent than the simplistic clockwork analogies of neoclassical economic thinking suggest.

In the neoclassical model, for example, it is dogma that "firms maximize profit." Neoliberals think that this is good, since they believe that unbridled profit-maximization automatically leads to efficiency and social welfare for all; The Buddhist thinkers quoted above think that it is bad, because profit-making is seen as the institutionalization of greed. Neither group, however, examines the dogma to see if it is true.

Business firms, in fact, do a great many things. They make products or services. They employ people: They are places where people work hard, or are lazy; make friendships, or not; find meaning in work, or can't wait to go home. They have a physical presence, and take things from the rest of the natural environment and put things back into it. Businesses develop relationships with the communities in which they locate, their customers, suppliers, and creditors. Sometimes these are healthy relationships, and sometimes not; sometimes they last, sometimes they do not. Businesses develop institutional histories and particular internal cultures—for example, some take pride in the quality of the good or service they produce, others in their role in their community, while others may be more innovation-oriented or finance-oriented, and they may be structured in more hierarchical or more egalitarian ways. They are populated by people who are sometimes wise and long-sighted, and sometimes greedy and short-sighted—and most often, a mix of the two. Sometimes people within a firm cooperate and work together well towards their joint goals, and sometimes firms are a mess of mismanagement and miscommunication. The activities of buying and selling depend in part on people's desire to make trades that are to their own advantage, but also on people's ability to trust each other, on people's creativity and initiative, on social structures of norms and reputation, and on state structures of regulation and enforcement. Markets are the way in which most people reading this book, most of the time (and contrary perhaps to our fantasies) get what we need to live. Businesses and markets are, in short, concrete, specific, physical and social institutions, not abstract "profit-maximizers" and spheres of pure exchange.

It is a myth that, somehow, on some more abstract systemic level, corporations are "run on rails," by law or competition, towards getting the last penny of profit. I have discussed the economic and legal aspects of this at length elsewhere, since this is a belief that many hold with great tenacity (Nelson 2006; Nelson 2006; Nelson 2010). Let me explore just one point here: the issue of excessive Chief Executive Officer compensation. News stories of outrageous CEO compensation are often taken by critics of capitalism as further evidence of "profit maximization" and greed. CEO bonuses in the tens of millions of dollars are evidence of greed, to be sure—but of plain old, garden-variety, human, samsaric greed, not some new, abstract, "systemic" variety.

To be precise, "profit" is what is left over after all a business's costs are paid, and, in theory, profit is supposed to be passed along to shareholders. The costs that are subtracted include compensation paid to workers, middle managers, *and top executives*. That is, for profits to be *high*, executive compensation should be kept *low*. According to core neoclassical economic theory, intense market competition among executives trying to land top managerial positions should cause firms to pay only the minimum necessary compensation necessary to engage their talent. Only a few extremists, however, believe that that is what is actually going on. Instead, existing structures of corporate governance that allow executives to sit on each other's boards and collude in jacking up compensation, along with a rising (at least until recently) social tolerance of greed, are more likely causes. Shareholders—that is, the parties who, in theory, are supposed to receive "maximum profits" more or less automatically—are some of the most vocal critics of excessive executive compensation. Many are engaging in what the business news media call "shareholder revolts," to try to bring compensation levels down (Economist 2010). None of this, of course, is supposed to be happening according to the dogmas of competitive market "forces" and rigid profit-maximization by firms. But it is happening. So when theory and the world conflict, which do we believe: the theory or the world?

If we take off the blinders of mechanical thinking and look at economic life as it is actually lived, we can see that—far from being "locked-up"—it provides numerous interstices for wise and compassionate response. The sorts of gaps or flexible areas in the functioning of actual businesses that allow some CEOs to take excessive compensation out of profits, for example, also create the space for other CEOs to make authentic movements towards better labor or environmental standards—to be the "good and honest businessperson" mentioned by the Dalai Lama (2002, 133). The opportunity to sell can be an opportunity to meet needs; the opportunity to buy can be an opportunity to support worthy ventures; the opportunity to work can be an opportunity to right livelihood. The system can also be shaped through citizen action and cultural mores: The capitalism of France, Japan, or Sweden, for example, is quite different from the capitalism of the United States or the United Kingdom, and capitalism of one era is different from that of another. Commerce has the potential to be "an act of participation and compassion" (Fischer 2005, 221-222).

Or not, of course. This loose, evolving, not-so-controllable system does not assure that we make decisions for the good, just as it does not assure that decisions are inevitably bad. But perhaps, some may reply, there is some *other* system that would make good decisions much easier?

### **Some Notes on Utopian Economies**

The vision of a better world—at its best, a fully peaceful society, founded on localism, communalism, small-scale non-profit enterprise, and spiritual values, and populated by wise and compassionate enlightened people—runs through a number of Buddhist writings.<sup>3</sup> And it has its place in motivating certain kinds of change. But it can

also be a dangerous delusion, if held too tightly. Does our vision of the kind of economy we want bring us more into the world, or distract us from it? Zen, and the general practice of living in the *now* instead of some imagined future, warns us against being distracted by our thoughts, and by our imagined requirements about how the world *should* be.

While we can certainly criticize the over-individualism of the neoclassical view of economics actors as radically autonomous, self-interested, and suited for a highly competitive and global economy, we should be careful about flipping to the opposite extreme of assuming that people are radically connected, altruistic, and suited for a highly cooperative and local economy. Such thinking, in fact, merely stays inside common, age-worn dualisms. In certain traditions of Western marriage, for example, the man was supposed to be the visible, individuated, achieving, instrumental-oriented party, who ventures out in the "wide world" to compete in (presumably) dog-eat-dog commerce. Meanwhile, the woman was supposed to put the interests of the family before her own, and (invisibly) concentrate on expressive work, within her very small sphere of (presumably) cooperative family relations.<sup>4</sup> Breaking out of this sort of dualist association requires noticing that that the identification of men with only individuality, and of women with only intimacy, are distorting and unhealthy on both sides. We are all, in fact, *both* individuated and connected in relationships. Or, as put by Robert Aitken in a Buddhist context,

“You and I come forth as the possibilities of essential nature, alone and independent as stars, yet reflecting and being reflected by all things. My life and yours are unfolding realization of total aloneness and total intimacy. The self is completely autonomous, yet exists only in resonance with all other selves.” (Aitken 1984, 13)

Notice that this does not come with caveats that it applies only to men, or only to women, or only to people in selected aspects (e.g., non-economic ones) of our lives. To imagine an economy in only local, altruistic, cooperative terms denies our individual and expansive side, just as much as conventional economic thinking denies our communal and nurturing side.

While the notion of separate spheres for men and women was supposed to lead to harmonious families, it too often led to unhappiness, oppression, and even abuse. Just because an organization is *presumably* motivated by love does not mean that it will actually be loving and nurturing—or even merely fair and nonlethal, as daily news of domestic violence reminds us. There are similar problems with the prescription that economic organizations be small and/or non-profit. Anyone with experience in a non-profit or community group (as well as a family) has likely observed that such structures do not necessarily foster wisdom and compassion, and certainly do not make people immune to greed, anger, and ignorance. Yet the arguments for utopian societies often seem to border on denigrating spiritual values, by arguing for "structural" solutions to economic problems in such a way that value issues are essentially made moot.

The idea that structures should be local in order to increase accountability, has some rationale to it. But I also detect an overtone here of demanding that Indra's Net somehow become tiny, because we individually feel more secure when we can personally observe what we want to control. One endpoint of this path is the gated community, where we achieve a semblance of local harmony only by segregating ourselves away from the rest of the world. I worry about the damage a one-sided emphasis on localism could do to some of the economically marginal areas of the world. In some places, trade and tourism now support a larger population than a country could otherwise support. Too much emphasis on localism could, in such cases, cause harm. Even a goal of organic agriculture can be grasped overly tightly. There are many debates about what "organic" actually means, and many good practices that are not covered by this term.

Issues of scale and structure need to be addressed as we deal with economic life and global pain as it presents itself. But simply reacting to dogmatic neoliberal globalization, marketization, and dreams of technological progress with an equally dogmatic localism, communalism, and idolization of "the natural" causes us to miss opportunities. These are the opportunities to authentically respond, in ways that work for the whole human person and the whole of Indra's Net.

### **Some Reflections on Buddhism and Economic Practice**

On one level, the insights of meditation and the expectations of what it means to be an economics professor would seem to be in conflict. Meditation is open, grounded, full of deep doubt about whether to believe everything (or anything) we think. On the other hand, professors are generally expected to do a lot of thinking, be very knowledgeable about a specific subject, and communicate this knowledge in an authoritative way to our students.

But on another level, the two roles are precisely in synch. Meditation, is, at heart, an investigation. What is investigated is not really as important as the attitude of investigation: an openness to what is, letting go of old concepts and beliefs, seeing things a new way, being surprised. Real science—not the rigid imposter that appears so often—is also, at heart, about investigation. The antonym of real science is not myth or religion. These may actually be ways to investigate realities of meaning and values not reachable through science. The opposite of science is *dogma*. Religious dogma, methodological dogma, neoclassical economic dogma, radical dogma, localism dogma—it doesn't matter what the source is—dogma shuts down investigation. It puts up signs that say "don't go there."

Authentic science, then, like meditation practice, is a process, not a set of results. Our theories are means, not ends. Our theories do not represent the world exactly: nothing can contain the fullness of the world but the world itself. The best thinkers and the best professors remember that even our favorite theories are the creation of our own minds—compelling and useful, at their best, but also never complete, never definitive, always open to revision as knowledge expands. The "don't know" mind of Zen does not

need to limit itself to the meditation cushion. We entertain a theory, and gather empirical data to see if it seems to be supported or refuted. That is we bring it up against what *is*. Even if it seems to be supported, we don't then claim that it is definitively true, in all its details. It may be that we haven't gathered enough evidence, or looked enough places. Or there maybe something about our particular viewpoint, or the terms of the theory itself, that is blinding us to something that is smack in front of us.<sup>5</sup> Our sense of self and our concepts may be getting in the way.

Does this mean that we can never know, with certainty, the real truth—about ourselves in meditation, or about the nature of natural or social systems? Well, yes. That answer may be disappointing, but actually the question isn't a very good one. A better question is whether we can have reasoned and grounded, if provisional, beliefs that are sufficient to allow us to inform and reflect on our actions. There is a frequent misconception that lacking a firm conviction in the truthfulness of our concepts will leave us paralyzed and unable to act. Or that if we don't have a map of the (presumed) full mechanics of the system in our heads, our actions will not be wise. Not so. Our actions arise. If they arise out of our self-centered minds—the mind that clings to dogma, fear, a need to control, and a conviction that my beliefs are better than yours—strife and suffering result. If they arise out of clear seeing of what actually is, here and now, with less "me" in the way, the possibility of wise and compassionate action is opened. What difference does it actually make for life, yours or mine or the planet's, whether our brains feel they have wrapped themselves around a concept that is definitively branded with (the concept) truth? Actually, not much. Neuroscientific research suggests that the feeling of certainty we get when we believe we have discovered a truth is just that—a feeling (Burton 2008). Just like pleasure or rage, it arises in the mind.

There are people lined up, on the left and the right and everywhere in between, ready to tell you the Truth about the economic system. I recommend that before, during, and after any engagement with these, you take a big breath, and check what you hear against what you see going on around you—what you touch and feel and smell in your day-to-day life. I recommend that you also observe the energies arising within you—the urge to attach, the urge to push away, the sense of hardening around a favorite position, the urge to take the easy out of creating answers in the mind, ignorant of the processes of the universe. I urge you to—in good scientific fashion—rely not on anecdotes as evidence, but look systematically at what is in front of you—at evidence for and against any argument—at least as far as time and energy permit.

## Conclusion

Sometimes I am accused of being Pollyannaish<sup>6</sup> about large corporations, because I do not firmly condemn "greedy global corporate capitalism." But this is not so. Rather, I am an equal-opportunity skeptic. I do not believe that any sort of institution—business, government, non-profit, local enterprise, community, family, or, alas, even sangha—has an essential "nature" that makes it *automatically* serve human (and ecological) ends, people being who we are. Our poisons, our thirst, our suffering, cannot

be made to magically disappear by some perfection of system, structure, or scale. Yet, in each moment, we have an opportunity to respond.

A key contribution of Buddhism, I believe, is in reminding us about non-attachment, and warning us against latching onto us-versus-them thinking. Applied to economic suffering, this does not mean inactivity, and does not mean that attempts at transformation, including through local community action, must be abandoned. But the teachings of the Middle Way, I suggest, should also encourage us to be alert to the temptations of self-righteousness and to be more open to wide and deep engagement with businesses, governments, and the larger, painful world.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Recent feminist literature has become more complicated as scholars deal with intersexuality, transsexuality, and the like. But the sex/gender distinction provides a rough typology that is useful when examining cultural stereotypes.

<sup>2</sup> For more on this history, see Nelson (2006).

<sup>3</sup> For example, Loy calls for "smaller, more localized economic institutions" (2003, 101); Jones imagines a "just and sustainable commonwealth" which is "direct, localized, and egalitarian," includes a large non-profit sector, and which is populated by a "new citizenry" (2003, 233-235); Norberg-Hodge imagines a radically localized, small-scale, and de-industrialized society (2002).

<sup>4</sup> In feminist economics, this is talked about as the myths of the "separative" and "soluble" selves (Nelson 1992; England 2003; , see also Nelson 2006), following on vocabulary originating with process theologian Catherine Keller (1986).

<sup>5</sup> Feminist notions of "strong objectivity" (Harding 1993) or "dynamic objectivity" (Keller 1985, 116) question the myth of detachment underlying some notions of science, and present a more relational, interdependent alternative—one that Buddhist scholars would find appealing.

<sup>6</sup> That is, naïve and overly optimistic.

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