

A Buddhist Socioeconomic System

Lessons from the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement in Sri Lanka

von **Dustin X. Hoang**

Economist Hazel Henderson asserts that "value-systems and ethics ... are the dominant, driving variables in all economic and technological systems" (Macy, 1983, p.19). Many economists and planners of developing countries have ignored this crucial idea -the idea that a society's system of values tends to shape the means and goals of its economic pursuits. To highlight the influence of social values on economy, we will examine the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement in Sri Lanka, an economic development program defined by reinterpreted Buddhist values. In examining this movement, I hope to inspire the reader to not only re-analyze the connection between values and mode of development in preindustrial countries, but also to re-analyze our own industrialized country and the motives behind our economic pursuits.

A. T. Ariyaratne, the head of the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement, was a high school science teacher at Nalanda College, a prestigious Buddhist high school in Colombo, Sri Lanka. He and other teachers wanted to broaden the horizons of their students, so in 1958 he and a group of students, teachers, and government workers organized a "holiday work camp" in the poor, low-caste village of Kanatoluwa (Bond, 1988, p.244). Ariyaratne wanted his students

"to understand and experience the true state of affairs that prevailed in the rural and poor urban areas [and] to develop a love for their people and utilize the education they received to find ways of building a more just and happier life for them" (Macy, 1983, p.24).

They lived with the villagers, listened to their problems, dug latrines, planted gardens, repaired a school, and built a place for religious worship. This camp, subsequently called a "shramadana" ("the giving of labor") camp, highly touched the students and workers. Within a few years, hundreds of schools in Sri Lanka organized weekend shramadana camps.

At first the benefits of these shramadana camps were primarily for the students; the camps enabled them to acquire a new perspective on Sri Lankan society and their place in it. But these camps also helped the destitute villagers acquire a different perspective of themselves:

"Sarvodaya found that a major barrier to village development was the apathy and hopelessness of the poor villagers. Ariyaratne has written, "A Sarvodaya Shramadana work camp has proved to be the most effective means of destroying the inertia of any moribund village community and of evoking appreciation of its own inherent strength and directing it towards the objective of improving its own conditions" (Bond, 1988, p.246).

First, the villagers would identify a major problem, such as the need for a well, latrines, or a road to link the village to the main road. Then, arrangements for volunteers would be made, operating on the Sarvodaya idea that these problems could be solved if everyone was willing to work together.

In 1967 Sarvodaya launched its "Hundred Villages Development Scheme," a project to establish village reawakening (gramodaya) in one hundred selected communities. This is the

point when the Sarvodaya movement changed from an educational/work camp movement to a village self-help economic development movement (Bond, 1988, p.247). Interestingly enough, Sarvodaya worked in conjunction with the Sri Lankan government's rural development departments up until this time; then, government support was withdrawn and Sarvodaya started receiving substantial aid from European organizations.

As I mentioned before, Sarvodaya's mode of economic development is different from others because it operates on different social values. Before Ariyaratne organized the first Shramadana camp, he already knew that Sinhalese Buddhist heritage would be an important factor in this program (Bond, 1988, p.247). After working in the camp, Ariyaratne proposed two sources for shaping a development plan appropriate for Sri Lanka. The first source was the traditional village value-system; Ariyaratne recognized the importance of "grass-roots" development, which he deemed to be a safer alternative to vanquishing indigenous traditions and assuming a foreign value-system. The second source, even more fundamental because it already influenced the village value-system, was the Buddhist Dharma. Bond (1988) says:

"The Sarvodaya movement grew out of the practice of social service. Social service became social development based on Buddhist values and ideals" (p.246).

Of course, it may seem strange that Buddhist values and ideals would lead to social and economic development. Actually, according to Ariyaratne, social and economic development is not an end in itself:

"The chief objective of Sarvodaya is awakening." The root problem of poverty is seen as being a sense of personal and collective powerlessness. And 'awakening' is to take place not in isolation but through social, economic, and political interaction. Personal awakening is seen as being interdependent with the awakening of one's local community, and both play a part in the awakening of one's nation and of the whole world (Jones, 1989, p.243).

The ultimate goal of Sarvodaya is Buddhist self-realization or enlightenment of individual and community. This "Sarvodaya," or "awakening of all" is achieved through "Shramadana," the selfless sharing of one's labor (Macy, 1988, p.175).

Through the sharing of one's labor and through understanding one another's experiences and sufferings, enlightenment can be reached:

Thus, the shared suffering of a community, the poverty, disease, exploitation, conflict and stagnation, is explored together by the members as is also the suffering experienced by each one of them. But, crucially, this suffering is shown to have its origins in individual egocentricity, distrust, greed, and competitiveness, which demoralizes and divides the community and wastes its potential (Jones, 1989, p.244).

Attaining enlightenment is to understand the nature of things better: life is suffering; there are causes of suffering (egocentricity, distrust, greed, competitiveness); and suffering can be alleviated by doing the right things.

For Sarvodaya, these right things not only include the selfless giving of one's labor, it also includes right modes of mind, here called the Four Abodes of the Buddha: metta (loving-kindness), karuna (compassion), muditha (rejoicing in other's good fortune), and upekkha (equanimity). The meditation practice for metta involves focusing on a person (such as an enemy) and wishing that person be free from fear, greed, sorrow, and other causes of

suffering. Karuna means to identify with others' suffering as if it were one's own; this opens up the compassion within all of us. Muditha is to rejoice in other's fortunes, the flip side of karuna. Upekkha sums up the other three in that one must realize that one has no essential self; rather, everything in the world is interconnected. This realization is important if one wants to understand one's true nature, to identify with others' suffering, and to effuse compassion (Macy, 1988, pp.176-8).

These Buddhist values that shape the Sarvodaya development model are radically different from the values that shape the Western capitalist model. Accordingly, these Buddhist values give economic development an extremely different flavor, making one realize how "economic development" is so often thought to be concomitant with Western capitalist values when, really, it does not have to be:

Development for Sarvodaya becomes essentially a synonym for awakening... Sarvodaya seeks an integrated development program that places human beings above everything else... Real development facilitates human awakening rather than increasing the GNP or the industrialization of the country... Rather than seeking economic growth, Sarvodaya seeks "right livelihood"... Right livelihood stresses harmony and the quality of life rather than ambition and working for profit only... Nonaggression, noncompetitiveness, and nonambition represent other traditional Buddhist values integral to Sarvodaya's ideal social order but foreign to both capitalism and materialism" (Bond, 1988, pp.264-7).

For Sarvodaya, economic development is not for the purpose of eternal maximization of profit or creating a consumer society in which people are led to believe they need more and more material things. Rather, these desires are perfect examples of ignorance, greed, and desire which, in Buddhist thinking, cause suffering.

Indeed, the Sarvodayan purpose of economic development is to create a community that fulfills people's basic needs, enough so that they can have the opportunity for spiritual development. Jones (1989) says:

Sarvodaya aims at an economy of modest sufficiency, employing appropriate low and middle technology, with equitable distribution of wealth and concern for the quality of the environment (p.245).

Through this modest economy, Sarvodaya hopes to fulfill ten basic human needs:

1) a clean and beautiful environment; 2) an adequate supply of safe water; 3) minimum requirements of clothing; 4) a balanced diet; 5) simple housing; 6) basic health care; 7) communication facilities; 8) energy; 9) total education related to life and living; 10) cultural and spiritual needs (Bond, 1988, p.267).

Here again, I must re-emphasize that Sarvodayan development is not for the sake of promoting materialism or profit maximization. It is for the welfare of the people, for their spiritual cultivation along Buddhist lines. Perhaps, Sarvodaya should not even be labeled as an "economic development" program because it is preeminently an "awakening" program and economic development is only a means toward that end.

By examining the means and goals of Sarvodaya we can certainly see how social and spiritual values can shape development. On the subject of spirituality, I must now mention that some people contend Sarvodaya values are not really traditional Buddhist values. They say that the

traditional Sri Lankan Theravadan tradition has been mostly world-renouncing, not world-affirming: "Buddhist ethical teachings [are] not the higher philosophy" (Bond, 1988, p.256). Social and economic matters are traditionally not considered a main part of the Dharma.

Essentially, Sarvodayan philosophy is Ariyaratne's reinterpretation of traditional Theravadan Buddhism. He is a proponent of what some call "socially engaged Buddhism." Ariyaratne explains that he has not radically departed from tradition; rather, his Sarvodaya philosophies have been based on the Buddha's social and ethical teachings in such suttas as the Kutadanta, Sigalovada, Mahamangala, and Parabhava Sutta, and in the Jataka tales which describe the Buddha's previous lives. (Jones [1989], another advocate of socially engaged Buddhism, also points to Ashoka and Nagarjuna as models of social enlightenment.) Ariyaratne explains that Sri Lankan Buddhism lost its social focus because colonial powers and Western Buddhist scholars feared rebellion by the people.

Whether or not Ariyaratne's claims are true, we do not know. Sarvodaya values do sound familiarly Buddhist, though: compassion, interconnectedness of all living beings, understanding of suffering, alleviation of suffering, selfless sharing of one's labor, "awakening," anatman, and nonviolence are all Buddhist concepts. The socioeconomic teachings of Sarvodaya are justified, according to Ariyaratne, by the Buddha's many socioeconomic teachings, which over time had been forgotten.

Does a reinterpretation of traditional Buddhism need vindication? According to one Sri Lankan bhikku, Sarvodaya is still Buddhism: there's suffering and there's the cessation of suffering. That suffering for Sri Lankan villagers is not just spiritual suffering; it's also a lack of basic material needs. The Buddha once said you can't follow the Dharma on an empty stomach; you can't follow the Dharma if you're slowly dying of poverty and disease. Socioeconomic development is a fulfilling of basic material needs in order to prepare people for the higher goal of Buddhist enlightenment. The key here is to follow the Middle Path--to be neither ascetically bereft of basic material needs nor overly indulgent in them.

The Sarvodayan model of socially engaged Buddhism shows that Buddhism and socioeconomic development are not necessarily contradictory, as long as Buddhist values shape, control, and delimit the means and goals of socioeconomic development. The socioeconomic focus of socially engaged Buddhism is only an expedient toward the higher Buddhist goal of enlightenment. Sarvodaya philosophy is ultimately based on compassion, detachment from desires, and the cessation of suffering.

To push the general argument further, this "untraditional" social awakening technique of the Sarvodaya movement should not be such a radical idea because Buddhism by its very philosophy of change and impermanence must necessarily adapt to each culture that it meets. While the means (social activism) may be different, Sarvodaya still has a Buddhist quality to it. Its social emphasis to me sounds somewhat reminiscent of the Mahayana Bodhisattva ideal, where nirvana is samsara and vice-versa. This ideal says that enlightenment can be found within the samsara of society. Similarly, Sarvodaya offers social service, the selfless giving of one's labor, as the means toward nirvana. To work with others, especially those in poverty, to cultivate compassion for others--this is Sarvodaya's technique for enlightenment. The socioeconomic development aspect of Sarvodaya is not only to provide better living conditions for the spreading of the Dharma, it also gives people a chance to be enlightened through social service.

The questioning of Sarvodaya values as "Buddhist" values should certainly be asked, since

the Buddha said that one must always question the validity of things. But it seems that, in philosophy at least, Sarvodaya has been shaped by familiar Buddhist values of compassion.

Another reason why some did not consider Sarvodaya to be particularly Buddhist was because of its ideal of religious pluralism. Here, we must again analyze, from a Buddhist perspective, the meaning of the word "Buddhist." If someone calls him- or herself Buddhist, and yet deliberately causes suffering unto others, is that person really Buddhist? This is an argument similar to Confucius's "rectification of names." What is a true king? What is a true father? In this case, what is truly Buddhist? Just because Sarvodaya tolerates religious minorities in Sri Lanka and encourages them to use their own value-systems for social development, does this really mean Sarvodaya is not "Buddhist"? Historically, Buddhism has been generally tolerant of other religions. Ariyaratne goes one step further and assumes that other religious traditions also contain basic Buddhist values.

This religious pluralism is a possible example of Mahayana's notion of "skillful means." No matter what the name of the religion one binds to--Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism--one may still reach the Buddhist notion of enlightenment, as long as one understands and, most importantly, practices those universal Buddhist values of compassion. The ongoing question that all Buddhists must be aware of is: to what extent is "Buddhism" no longer Buddhism, and to what degree are other religious traditions "Buddhist"? We must be constantly aware of the higher Buddhist end which transcends even the word "Buddhist," and we must skillfully examine the myriad means to that end, whether or not they are labeled as "Buddhist."

Besides the criticism of Sarvodaya being a faux pas Buddhist movement, there have been other criticisms of the reality of Sarvodaya versus its ideal model of social order. Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988) have pointed out (through Kantowsky's study) that the Sarvodaya reality is not as perfect as its ideology. Many of Ariyaratne's rules reflect urban Buddhist bourgeoisie class values, imposed upon the villagers. For example, the duties of a wife toward her husband: "To consider one's husband as a god and do herself everything to look after him with affection" (Gombrich & Obeyesekere, 1988, p.249). Attitudes prescribed for employees include: "To wake up before the employer and start work; to go to rest after the employer; always speak good of the employer and never speak evil" (Gombrich & Obeyesekere, 1988, p.249).

Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988) also mention how while urban middle-class Sri Lankan Buddhists may promote the simple life for the villagers, they themselves do not participate in village for long and "are meanwhile educating their own daughters to be lawyers, doctors, and engineers and pushing them to win scholarships to receive an education abroad" (Gombrich & Obeyesekere, 1988, p.249). These examples of reality in Sri Lanka are causes for worry and reform. Criticism of Sarvodaya--as long as it is made manifest to Sarvodaya followers--will only further enlighten everyone. As for the example of the hypocritical urbanites, I do not hesitate to say that perhaps those hard-working villagers and village workers who "lead the simple life" are farther along the road to enlightenment than the urban middle-class.

Another criticism of Sarvodaya is the paradox of Sarvodaya's ideal of self-reliance and its heavy dependence on Dutch, German, and American funding agencies. In response, Ariyaratne replies that

In the light of the structural inequalities at work in our world today, and considering the state of material and psychological dependence existing in the impoverished countries, self-

reliance is a relative term, and not to be confused with financial independence. Until a just economic order prevails, such independence is a chimera, and "for the haves to turn towards the have-nots and tell them to be self-reliant is a very superficial statement" (Macy, 1983, p.43).

Self-reliance in the Sarvodaya sense actually means empowerment to the destitute Sri Lankan villagers so that they can be motivated to relieve their own suffering. From a (Zen) Buddhist point of view, an independent economy may never have existed, since nothing can be entirely independent. These days, political scientists say that a global economy--a vast, organic, interconnected, international economic system--is the inevitable state of world economics.

One final criticism that I want to address is the fact that some people may be highly skeptical of Sarvodaya ideals because they seem highly utopian. The (Soviet) Communist model was utopian, and it failed. Sarvodaya differs from and criticizes Communism because of several reasons. First of all, Communism was a totalitarian society in which almost all power was concentrated in the state. Sarvodaya seeks to decentralize suffering--invoking power and promotes the self-reliance of the people. Second, Communism did not realize the need for spirituality, adhering to Marx's critique that religion is the opiate of the masses. The problem with this view of religion is that it ignores the possibility that religion is one of humankind's most basic needs. Perhaps Communism may have fared better if its leaders had more values of compassion.

Sarvodaya does seem utopian, and perfection is something hard to come by within samsara. Instead of doubting the possibility of perfection, perhaps a demeanor of practicality is better. The questions one should really be asking are: Can the amount of suffering in the world be alleviated to any extent? And, if so, what are some means for doing that?

Sarvodaya, having lasted for over three decades, has received attention from outsiders. In truth, it is a movement which ideally wants to turn global, for its goal is the awakening of all people--a goal that sounds similar to the Bodhisattva's vow of helping all sentient beings attain enlightenment. Some Sarvodaya groups have already existed for several years in the Netherlands, Belgium, and West Germany, and in 1981 Sarvodaya Shramadana International was founded (Jones, 1989, p.251).

The influence of Sarvodaya ideals are not surprising. Sarvodaya offers an alternative to capitalism, the type of economy that has now reached all corners of the globe. Sarvodaya questions the goals of capitalism (irrational eternal maximization of profit) and the values which underlie those goals (competition, material desire, and greed). Operating under Buddhist values, Sarvodaya proposes that socioeconomic development should fulfill basic human needs: a clean and beautiful environment; an adequate supply of safe water; minimum requirements of clothing; a balanced diet; simple housing; basic health care; communication facilities; energy; education; and cultural and spiritual needs. Through the giving of labor, the first nine material needs are fulfilled. Through understanding others' suffering by laboring with them, the last need--spirituality- is fulfilled. The ultimate goal of Sarvodaya socioeconomic development is to help people on the road toward spiritual enlightenment.

By examining the Sarvodaya movement, we industrialized countries can learn more about ourselves. What are our values? How are these values reflected in our economy? Looking at Sarvodaya's Ten Basic Needs, how can Sarvodayans be happy with those few minimal needs while we industrialized countries who have so much more material things are constantly yearning for ever more? Even if it may seem impossible for us industrialized countries to

become Sarvodayas, we can at least learn more about how we create suffering unto ourselves and others, and about how this massive suffering can be alleviated.

References:

Bond, G. D. (1988). *The Buddhist revival in Sri Lanka: religious tradition, reinterpretation, and response*. Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina.

Cabrera, L. (1985, Jan.-Feb.). A volunteer's experience. *World Health*, pp. 10-11.

Colletta, N. J., Ewing, R. T., & Todd, T. A. (1982). Cultural revitalization, participatory nonformal education, and village development in Sri Lanka: the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement. *Comparative Education Review*, 26 (2), 271-286.

Gombrich, R., & Obeyesekere, G. (1988). *Buddhism transformed: religious change in Sri Lanka*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Jones, K. (1989). *The social face of Buddhism: an approach to political and social activism*. London: Wisdom Publications.

Kantowsky, D. (1980). *Sarvodaya: the other development*. New Delhi: Vikas.

Macy, J. (1983). *Dharma and development: religion as resource in the Sarvodaya self-help movement*. West Hartford, Connecticut: Kumarian Press.

Macy, J. (1988). In Indra's net: Sarvodaya and our mutual efforts for peace. In F. Eppsteiner (Ed.), *The path of compassion: writings on socially engaged Buddhism* (pp. 170-181). Berkeley, California: Parallax Press.

Williams, J. R. (1984). Religion, ethics, and development: an analysis of the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement of Sri Lanka. *Canadian Journal of Development Studies*, 5 (1), 157-167.

Zadek, S. (1993). The practice of Buddhist economics? Another view. *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 52 (4), 433-445.