

The Buddhist Concept as a Solution to the Environmental Crisis

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Abstract

The Buddhist concept and the mainstream economy concept derive from “craving”, both of them are totally different in every dimension. Buddhist concept can cover flaws and propose better ways to conserving the environment and solving environmental crisis. The Buddhist concept is proposed to replace mainstream economy concept and the paradigm shift should be implemented as fast as possible. New paradigm shift will systematically lead to the new form of economy and society which are environmentally friendly, induce sustainable development and strike a balance between body and mind later.

Keyword : Buddhist Concept, Solution, the Environmental Crisis

Introduction

At present, the environment crisis is one of the most important problems affecting both economy and society. The devastation of the environment is not a problem of one particular country but it is a global phenomenon (D. Pearce, J.J. Warford as cited in Preecha Piampongsan, 1997). According to the Limits to Growth Model of MIT University which was the most famous economic and environmental model presented in 1972 by D.H. Meadow and improved in 1992 under the name “Beyond the Limit-Global Collapse of Sustainable Future”, this research team concluded that the Limits to Growth Model can be used for forecasting although it has been 20 years. From this model, there were three conclusions (D.H. Meadows, et. al as cited in Preecha Piampongsan, 1997) ;

1. If the expansion of world population, industries, pollution, food producing and deterioration of resources continue, the limit of the growth will be reached within 100 years. The consequence is the prompt recession in terms of population and industrial production capacity.

2. The way to change this expansion is to create the conditions for stability in terms of economy and sustainable ecology. The development and the use of new technology can not help people get away from the crisis.

3. The major characteristic of the model is the “overshoot” or the development that is beyond the limit, leading to the collapse. If people decide to follow the means of sustainable development, it should be implemented very fast.

From the conclusion of the Limits to Growth Model, it can be seen

that the current methods to solve the environmental problem using science and technology tackle only at the end of the root causes. Besides, the conclusion of this model allows us to realize that the sustainable solution to the environmental crisis requires paradigm shift of economic system. The report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) under the name “Brundtland Report” proposes that, to achieve sustainable development, economy and environment can not be separated. Because they have interaction, the sustainable development is possible when the means are different from nowadays. The environmental issues must be incorporated with the planning of macroeconomics and microeconomics (Preecha Piampongsan, 1997) policies. Moreover, Peter Russell mentioned in “Waking Up in Time” that the exact root cause of the environmental problem is the wrong consciousness. The solution to the crisis we are facing does not depend on material change or external mechanism, but on the change from inside or conscious.

He proposed concrete methods for an extension of conscious; from narrow-minded to the change of consciousness (Sorrayut Ratanapojnard, 1997). This information emphasizes that the root cause of environmental crisis derives from the concept which people pay attention to their physical existence and try to find things to serve their needs stimulated by mainstream economic trend. The more the influence of consumerism becomes stronger following globalization, the more people are self-centered and consume unthinkingly. This brings about the lack of consciousness and the lack of the sense of belonging for the environment. Besides, people think that the environment is to respond to people’s needs and satisfaction. This concept leads to the exploitation of resources and the destruction of the environment without awareness of bad results.

The major cause of environmental crisis is from the economic system based on the concept about relationship between human and environment. This is influenced by mainstream economics and consumerism leading to the false paradigm. The change of concept about relationship between human and environment to create new world view in terms of economy and environment to solve problems in the long term must be done instantly before it is too late. James Lovelock, owner of the Gaia Theory mentioned in “The Revenge of Gaia: Earth’s Climate in Crisis and the Fate of Humanity” published in B.E. 2549 that ecological system has passed the crisis or the point of no return. Henceforth, even though people attempt to solve the problem, they cannot get away from the enormous ecological disaster. Within this century, billion of people will die from natural disaster owing to an enormous change of world’s climate.

However, Irvin Laszlo, author of the book “The Chaos Point : The World at the Crossroads” who exhibits Chaos Theory predicts that humans still have little times to change their behavior contributing to our changing planet to bring about sustainable development. If humans still neglect and adhere to their familiar behavior and use a lot of energy, the world will permanently fall (Sawai Boonma, 2007). From the mentioned predictions, the

two academics have the same opinion that the world has come to crisis and there is an urgent need to a large-scale change in the concept about humans and environment to create new consciousness enhancing sustainable development.

This new concept should not rely only on the environmental-friendly activities but also correct mistakes due to the mainstream concept. In this article, the writer will present the new concept based on Buddhist Teachings as an option for sustainable development and criticize the problem of the old concept from the mainstream economy that leads to the environmental problem. The details are as follows;

Mainstream Concept

E.F. Shumacher, ecological economist mentioned in the book “Small is Beautiful” that the environmental deterioration comes from people’s lifestyles in the new era based on some basic beliefs. This fact specifies that environmental crisis occurring around the world comes from views and ethics existing in the mainstream economics.(E.F. Schumacher as cited in Preecha Piampongson, 1997)

From E.F. Shumacher, mainstream economic system is a free-trade economy based on the economic system of Neoclassical school (This is an economics school which has been founded and developed at the end of 19th century. Major concept of Neoclassic school mostly has been carried on and adapted from the concept of classic school led by Adam Smith.) highly influenced by Utilitarianism. This system is taking humanity to critical conditions because mainstream economics emphasize the achievement of economical goal by individual’s decision. It focuses on personal benefits based on consumption and quantity. Therefore, it creates a conflict between personal ethics and social ethics which cannot be compatible. When there is an ethical conflict, especially the one that is relevant to the environment, individual will select to protect their personal benefits rather than public benefits.

In addition, the concept of Neoclassical economics has a view on humans as machines or small mechanisms in the society which tend to be self-centered and express themselves in doing something for their own benefits which is called “selfishness”. Individual will seek the most satisfied things. Consequently, this concept has an opinion that humans have a reason to select the best method to receive the best thing with the least loss. The best human qualification indicator is quantitative indicator measured from prosperity or property. Social benefits are measured from the national income, public utilities and material prosperity, etc.(Soontaraporn Techapalokul,1990 :11-13)

The perfect humans in this concept are the ones who judge logically based on complete information responsive to their needs. They think simply about effectiveness, perceive life merely as a labor or one of production materials. They are not interested in methods but ultimate goal they would like to achieve; prosperity. This perfect human being is specifically called Economic Man or Homo Economicus (Piti Srisangnam Retrieved 12 March

2009. From <http://mblog.manager.co.th/piti31/th-18607/>) It can be seen that this concept focuses on the responses to individual's needs. They believe that prosperity is the real happiness and is able to be measured from quantity and objects.

Jeremy Bentham influenced by John Locke believed that desire is the feeling that creates pain. Although Locke did not clearly understand desire, he said that humans need to compensate their pain with pleasure (For more details, see John Locke, **Essay on Human Understanding**.) which lead to Bentham's concept that human rationale push human forward to perform to seek happiness and avoid pain. (Soontaraporn Techapalokul, 1990 :59-61)

This leads to the creation of Utilitarianism. Later, it was improved by John Stuart Mille who took spiritual value into consideration. He considered short-term and long-term consequences and explain the Greatest Happiness Principle. It is said that people do something aiming for benefits or happiness. The right action is the one that brings about the largest amount of happiness. This happiness is not only for oneself but also for the public.

Although the Utilitarianism is not famous nowadays, this concept is still a mechanic behind the decision making of individual and collective group such as government in terms of economy, politics and society which induce environmental crisis. This is because this concept is related to common sense of humans with desires. The clear example is the government's decision to deforest so as to construct a dam. This is the decision for benefits of majority and majority's types of happiness are to have good public utilities from the dam construction. This can be seen even the economic and social policy of every Thai government. This happiness should be concrete, touched by our senses, focusing on physical appearance, measured by quantity and provide fast outcomes. They do not consider abstract happiness, happiness of other lives or protection of global benefits or descendant's benefits in the future. If we consider carefully, even the solution to environmental crisis at present occur because humans need to survive and live happily. Therefore, we cannot deny that the solution to the problem is based on beneficial concept aiming at physical happiness of humans. Therefore, it is not possible to solve the environmental problem sustainably, if we adhere to the mainstream economy concept which considers the importance of human.

Additionally, the concept of mainstream economy leads to social concept which considers the human nature as power and picture of the society. When humans are machines and small mechanics, the society is a large machine which combines small mechanics together. The power controlling humans to move and attract each other is "will" of human which creates the harmony of mutual benefits. This concept contributes to free- trade economy system (Soontaraporn Techapalokul, 1990: 11). It can be seen that this concept do not mention environment, nature or other value apart from humans. If something else is mentioned, these are only tools to conduct activities in response to human's needs. Therefore, there is unsurprisingly the crisis of environmental problem. Because people

focus on themselves, activities are for creating happiness and relieving individual distress. This concept leads to methods, theories, procedures and creation of economy and social system which have been harming the environment. Knowledge of science and technology are merely the tools to create happiness for humans. People dominated by this mainstream economy believe that the economic prosperity, the large consumption of materials and the high profits are the ultimate success and goal. This contributes to the view that sees things separately. G.T. Miller, an ecologist, mentions about the view of people in the new industrial society is “Throwaway world view” or “frontier world view”. It is believed that humans are separate from nature and are superior to other living things. Human has a role to defeat and force the nature to be under his power and use it for his own benefits. Resources are abundant without limit. If they are insufficient, people are able to seek for new things to compensate. The important people are those who are able to control and make the best use of resources. The more they manufacture and consume, the more they receive because it shows more progress. (George Tyler Miller as cited in Preecha Piampongsan, 1997 :190)

Not only Miller, T.O’Riordan, a political ecologist, has the same concept. He believes that the principle view dominating the industrial society is Technocentrism. It is based on 4 concepts; progress, rationality, managerial efficiency and control (Timothy O’Riordan as cited in Preecha Piampongsan, 1997 :191). It can be seen that the two concepts pay most attention to humans. They believe that humans are superior to nature. Importantly, they believe that people and nature are separated. It can be concluded that the two views perceive human as master and nature as servant. According to a recent movement about environmental conservation, a new view occurs under the name “Space-ship earth world view”. This view perceives that the world is the big spaceship with life-support system. We need to take care of it and protect it carefully otherwise the spaceship will face problems and collapse (George Tyler Miller as cited in Preecha Piampongsan, 1997 :192). This view pays attention to nature and environment more than the two above mentioned views does. However, this view is based on the old view focusing on humans as much important. Humans can manage and control the environment.

From the abovementioned explanation, there is the complexity of the concepts which are overlapped. It begins with Lock’s concept mentioning about desire and search for happiness to eliminate pain from desire. Then it becomes the foundation of Utilitarianism in accordance with Bentham’s concept. This was improved by Mille and become an ideology of classic and neoclassic economics which are the mainstream economics system. This is the basis of free-trade economy system which creates capitalism and consumerism system. Its strength depends on the power of industrial system, science and technology. This creates the aforementioned view which can be presented as a diagram as per below;

From the diagram, although the concept has been developed

into complex economic and social procedures, the concept behind this development is still the old concept whose emphasis is on the responses to human needs. No matter how this procedure has been developed to create economic and social system which is enormous and complex, there will be no sustainable solution to environmental crisis if the concept remains unchanged. This is because human needs are unlimited and motivated to strive for more as a result of globalization and consumerism. From a long history and development of humanity, it cannot be seen that human needs has decreased but increased continuously in accordance with technological development. For example, when cars were able to be manufactured, they almost become the 5th factors of human needs. With the telecommunication advancement, mobile phones become things everyone must have. Therefore, if the belief in the concept of responding the human needs to release pain from desire continues and no change of view that leads to human paradigm shift occurs, the collapse of global ecological system is inevitable.

Buddhist Concept

As mentioned, the concept of mainstream economy which is the cause of environmental crisis starts from John Locke's concept. It is about the way to stop pain and torment from desire by creating happiness and satisfaction which lead to Utilitarianism and philosophy of economics. The beginning of the concept is from desire. However, with incomprehension and unclear acknowledgement of the feeling of desire, John Locke proposed the wrong solutions eventually.

In Buddhism, it is also mentioned about the feeling called "craving". It means need, desire, craving for pleasure and escape from painful feeling (Phra Dhammapidok (P.A. Payutto), 1990: 110). It is a characteristic of mind that struggles for what it longs for. After getting what it wants, it will be relaxed and happy. There are 3 types of craving (Phra Dhammapidok (P.A. Payutto), 1990: 115);

- 1) craving for sensual pleasures
- 2) craving for existence
- 3) craving for non-existence; craving for self-annihilation. It can be shown as rough feeling such as boredom, loneliness and self-hatred.

Buddhism has the same view as John Locke that craving is an origin of activities around the world. Every types of desire share common characteristic; clinging to oneself and doing everything for oneself. Activities are pushed by craving. Buddhism shares the same opinion as mainstream economics that resources are limited but humans' desires are unlimited. It can be seen from the words of the Lord Buddha that "No river is equal to desires" (Thaweewat Pundrarikwiat, 1998). However, Buddhism does not seek to meet the desire by creating happiness through responding the people's needs like John Locke's concept and Utilitarianism. The concept of desire in Buddhist Teachings is perceived as a kind of sensualities which creates oneself and leads to endless sufferings. Therefore, Buddhism chooses to find the means to reduce and control desire from temporal to permanent

levels instead. Besides, Buddhism explains an origin of desire through the wheel of existence called “the dependent origination”. It means the status of dependent things which will happen upon depending on other things. Everything in the world cannot originate and exist without the dependent origination. They depend on each other. The dependent origination concept brings about practical teaching; the noble Eightfold Path and other Buddhist Teachings.

From the dependent origination, everything both living and non-living things is relevant to each other, under the power of birth and death and is impermanent. Thus the dependent origination is in the middle of Eternalism and Nihilism. Therefore, the phenomena are in the middle of absolute existence and nothingness.

The dependent origination consists of;

1. Ignorance
2. Kamma-formations
3. Consciousness
4. Mind and matter; mind consists of feeling, perception, intention, contact, attention. Matter consist of 4 principle elements (earth, wind, fire, water)
5. Six Sense-Bases; internal and external
6. Contact
7. Feeling
8. Craving
9. Clinging
10. Becoming
11. Birth
12. Decay and Death

The twelve elements of the dependent origination are reasoned attention of each other and connected like a wheel. In the wheel of the dependent origination, an origin of craving is the contact between internal sense-fields and external sense-fields, which leads to contact/ sense-impression. Then sense-impression create feeling; a mood of happiness, sadness, or neutral. After that craving which is desire of feeling will happen.

When craving leads to suffering, Buddhist Teachings and practices focus on ending the suffering by mainly reducing craving. This is for mental happiness which is beyond the worldly emotions, lasting and more delicate than physical happiness. Certainly, there are no indicators that can measure the amount of this happiness. This is opposite to the mainstream economics concept which satisfies human needs with materials which is definitely never fulfilled. Besides, physical happiness does not last forever. Therefore, Buddhism concept is different from the old concept thoroughly.

Buddhist concept sees craving as a factor leading to sufferings which needs to be reduced. The individuals who uphold to this concept shall consume less and use things valuably. This is not in response to needs but to consume for a normal and happy life. This method will reduce selfness and people will be less selfish and see values of things. People feel less

isolated and become a part of nature. Restraint of senses; eyes, ears, nose, and solitary are practices of this concept. This can greatly reduce the utilization of resources. If this is the major concept of our society, it can lead to massive change in ecological system.

In addition, the concept of dependent origination allows people to think in Buddhist ways that they do not have great selfness but they are originated by reasoned attention called craving. Generally acknowledged or supposed, humans exist. However, in the ultimate reality, humans do not exist. This concept cannot only reduce selfness which lead to selfishness, but can also make people realize that humans and nature depend on each other because they are reasoned attention of each other. Humans are not great but only the small elements of the world. Humans cannot control or defeat the nature because they are under natural law; impermanence, state of suffering and soullessness.

Although the Buddhist concept and the mainstream economy concept derive from “craving”, both of them are totally different in every dimension. Although Buddhism concept can cover flaws and propose better ways to conserving the environment and solving environmental crisis, someone may wonder whether this concept is possible in terms of practices. This is not a difficult issue because the suitable one is Buddhist Economics. Many western and eastern academics have proposed this concept such as **E.F. Shumacher**, **Phra Bhramagunabhorn (P.A. Payutto)** and **Buddhadasa Bhikkhu**. In the writer’s opinion, the economics system which is in line with Buddhist concept is Sufficiency Economy.

However, some may pose question that how Buddhist Economics and Sufficiency Economy can develop and foster prosperity for humans because this way does not focus on monetary profit making, while reducing consumption. If we see from the old concept’s perspective, this argument will be correct because the objection comes from the people adhering to materialism concept. However, if someone questions based on Buddhist concept, it will be understood that prosperity from Buddhist Economics and Sufficiency Economy are not materialism but are development for mental progression. This concept creates economy system that people can live peacefully and in harmony with nature.

Conclusion

In this article, the writer mentions the current mainstream concept which create environmental crisis. The Buddhist concept is proposed to replace mainstream concept. The origin of both concepts is “craving” but their responses to craving are totally different. Finally, it reveals that mainstream concept leads to false economic and social paradigm. There are many problems including environmental crisis which has become the major problem of the current economic system. Although many people have tried to propose many ways to solve the environmental crisis, for examples, the application of new technology which is environmental

friendly, the use of alternative energy or new concept which protects the environment, these are problem solving at the end of the causes. These efforts can prevent the collapse of the environment in a short time but are not the real solutions. Hidden paradigm which drives mechanics in the society is still the old paradigm focusing on human needs. Although many people said that they do not have this paradigm or do not know about it, their daily behavior can indicate the paradigm they follow. Economic and administrative system also follows the mainstream concept. Therefore, the most sustainable way to solve the environmental crisis and other social problems is paradigm shift which should be implemented as fast as possible. New paradigm shift will systematically lead to the new form of economy and society which are environmental friendly, induce sustainable development and strike a balance between body and mind later.

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