

# How Can Buddhism Stay Relevant in Today's Capitalist Environment?

*Apichai Punthasen\**

The Center for Buddhist Studies, Chulalongkorn University, organized a seminar on January 21, 2015, at the Conference Room 707 of its Boromrajakumari Building. Participants were Buddhist scholars from a number of institutes. The question of the seminar was put forward by Professor Emeritus Preecha Changkhwanyuen and taken up by Professor Apichai Panthasen who led the discussion. The following is a summary of the deliberations.

## The Question

“Capitalism is a very powerful *Asura* demon  
Whose mouth chants black magic spells like the Vedas from  
Brahma’s mouth.  
By its spell, forests disappear, leaving behind barren mountains.  
By its spell, water and air are polluted.  
By its spell, farmlands become an urban landscape dotted with  
ugly buildings.  
By its spell, everything becomes mechanized – cars, boats, factories,  
and household appliances.  
By its spell, entertainment establishments spring up offering alluring  
and sexual charms.

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\* Apichai Punthasen, Ph.D.; Professor in Economics  
Advisor of Rural And Social Management Institute (RASMI)

By its spell, people are addicted to its creation of technology.

By its spell, people consume everything in their path, getting sick from its toxin in the process.

By its spell, money is created and the future of self and of the next generations is consumed.

It turns the rural areas into a place inhabited only by old people and young children – people who consume little.

By its spell, young people and affluent ones gather to live in cities.

By its spell, it creates slaves and masters who work together while worshipping money as their God.

Everyone everywhere, from every class and every education level, produces and consumes whatever it commands.

Profits grow as a result of consumption made possible by production,

By which natural resources are wasted and polluted.

Even religious people, coming into contact with it, can be defeated.

Filled with a consuming desire, people are unafraid of diseases, dangers, poisons, prisons, or even forces of good and evil.

Even seemingly good deeds, for example, to preserve life, are done not out of kindness, but out of self-interest and for profit.

Its spell dominates the whole world – every State, town, district, sub-district, and village.

More importantly, it controls people's minds; much of Buddhism is already under its control.

How can one turn the dominated part into the dominating one?

How can Buddhism retain its significance in the capitalist society?

Will it lose to this *Asura*?

Will value succumb to volume? Will religion yield to *Kilesa*? Will the religious institute give way to corporate interests? Will spiritual Dhamma be defeated by material desire?

Will Buddhism be gone? What will bring it back?

This is the issue that the Buddhist Studies Center invites you to ponder on.

I hereby declare the seminar open and wish you every success.”

The following is the discussion on the issue led by Professor Apichai Panthasen and participants of the seminar:

## The Discussion

This year will mark the advent of the ASEAN Community with its three pillars: ASEAN Political-Security Community, ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, and ASEAN Economic Community. The first two pillars do not receive as much interest as does the economic component. When it comes to economic matters, what everyone in ASEAN expects to see is greater wealth and prosperity, simply because ASEAN countries have so many resources. Lao PDR, with its small population, is rich in resources. Myanmar, having emerged from being a closed society, has much of its natural abundance still unused. Others look to Cambodia as having abundant resources and cheap labor. At the same time, countries with higher technology and greater capital can capitalize on their advantages and increase their production capacity. They, naturally, talk more about trade. But when one talks about who will benefit and to what extent, the tone becomes somewhat different. People will speak in general terms that everyone will benefit, because production as a whole will increase. Yet, when capital is used as the principal production factor, those with more capital will reap greater benefits. Of course, those with less capital will also benefit but to a lesser degree. Benefits here refer to economic ones. So, if we are not united as ASEAN, we may still have room to set our own domestic policies. In Thailand, for example, His Majesty the King has graciously given us the Philosophy of Sufficiency Economy by which Thai people are encouraged to live their lives in a sufficient manner. On the other hand, when we are integrated into the ASEAN Community, we like to see more foreign investment. According to our Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs, if we want our GDP to have an annual growth of about 4-5% we must turn our country into a trade economy. However, we should recall that His Majesty the King graciously advised the nation of the importance of Sufficiency Economy as soon as he saw that the country was embracing too much of the trade economy, while at the same time still recognizing the significance of trade.

The way capitalism operates significantly undermines the possibility of happiness based on a simple way of life. Such simplicity of life lies at the heart of Buddhism and is also embraced by other religions. Even communism does not escape the capitalist influence, as it also attaches no less importance to materialism at the expense of spiritualism. We should first and foremost ask what capitalism is. Those who have studied philosophy would say that it is an economic system in which, according to Marx, the mode of production is governed by capital. Historically, human society started from the primitive communist stage where everyone would share what was produced by hunting and gathering. This was the time when labor was scarce. So, the extent of the production depended on the availability of labor. Each family would try to produce as many offspring as possible. They may also conquer other tribes and enslave their people to work for them. Primitive communism, thus, gave rise to slave society. Marx explained how slavery was practiced in Ancient Egypt and the Roman time. This was followed by the rise of agriculture on which prosperity was based and in which land became a major mode of production. At the same time the Roman Empire was in decline and finally lost its power. Europe went into the Dark Age in which war lords vied against one another for power and took control of available land. Marx called this period feudalism. This later gave way to the institution of monarchy, nation-state, trade cooperation between the state and traders, and colonialism. The accumulation of capital began – a form of capitalism in its early stage. This was followed by cooperation between the monarchy and traders – a form of money politics. In other words, monarchs and traders worked together as partners, with the former providing military protection, while the latter went into the world to trade and shared the profits with the former. More towns grew; so did the traders. Urbanization meant greater prosperity. Then, the trading class worked with peasants to overthrow the monarchy. In this regard, capitalism evolved with democracy.

The essence of capitalism is the presence of capital as one of the most important modes of production. Greater production entails more capital made possible by capital accumulation, which in turn is made possible by profit, which in turn is made possible by labor surplus. Workers

would, of course, receive some profits, while most would be kept by capitalists. In the case of Thailand, there are stories told again and again about foreign migrants in the old days who came here with almost nothing and worked their way up to eventually become millionaires and billionaires. This was possible because they benefited from the labor surplus. Whoever was able to expand their business would see greater capital accumulation at the same time. Apparently, everything looked good except for the fact that with capital expansion, returns per unit would be smaller. To ensure that production would continue unhindered, they needed to upscale the size of their capital on a continual basis. In addition, profits depended on sale volume. An inadequate volume would mean loss. So, to ensure volume, consumption demands needed to be constantly stimulated. At the same time, the production mode was changed from being agriculture-based to industry-based. The agriculture-based production much depended on climate conditions, while the industry-based counterpart could be operated non-stop day and night at an increasingly faster pace. Therefore, these three elements of capitalism, industrialism, and consumerism go hand in hand, lending support to one another. The final outcome of the combination is materialism as we know it. Actually, during Marx's lifetime there was another opposite school of thought led by Herbert Spencer. Nevertheless, despite their differences, both shared the belief that although capitalism was something of a problem, it was just a passing phase that would soon go away. Yet now, after centuries have lapsed, it still remains.

Modern capitalism is not the same as that during the Industrial Revolution in England. It has evolved with greater complexity. It is difficult to follow and, therefore, likely to stay for quite some time yet. A factor that has often been mentioned as a catalyst of change is knowledge economy or creative economy or, as it has been called more recently, digital economy. Whatever the name, the approach is still within the confines of capitalism. The author of this paper, while writing a book on Buddhist Economics, thought that in order to move beyond capitalism one needed to reach a stage called intellectualism, which the Asoke School here calls *Puñña-ism*, while the international community will talk about Alternative Economy. No matter what approach one wants to adopt, the move away

from materialism requires a presence of *Guṇadhamma* or moral conduct as an essential driver. This is a thought-based science, unlike a physical science or physics with its emphasis on relationships especially between matter and energy. In Buddhism, a consciousness or *Citta* is a state of energy that can occur in conjunction with matter or *Rūpa*. So *Citta* operates as both mind and matter or *Nāmarūpa*. In other words, if it is merely a form of energy without matter or *Rūpa*, it cannot observe how consciousness operates. Besides, *Citta* can be developed *ad infinitum*. In fact, *Citta* at different stages of development will have different perceptions or understandings of things. This is something that a physical science may fail to understand or refuse to acknowledge. If it does, it may be more willing to embrace the notion. A more developed *Citta* will better grasp the significance of various natural phenomena than a less developed one. It is a pity that we have not yet had a standard instrument that can gauge it. It is possible that there exist people with special abilities to do so. Even if there are such people, they could not and should not reveal themselves because it is considered a matter of individual talents. If someone claims to have reached attainments at such and such levels, they could be accused of showing *Uttarimanussadhamma*. Therefore, an assessment of *Citta* development is subject to individual judgments.

This is very important, as the ultimate aim of Buddhists is to reach a state of non-suffering or *Nibbāna*. Whether or not such a state is possible depends on the level of *Citta* development and its capability. When we say that capitalism is a bad guy, it comes in many guises. It does not abstractly manifest itself as a demon; its power is seen and felt in the form of goods and services in the marketplace as well as other amenities. Actually, in the olden days many people wanted to possess certain power and were willing to undergo extensive spiritual *Citta* practice. Capitalism, however, can empower us without necessarily going through such practice. It responds to our basic needs and beyond, making it possible for us to do something previously thought impossible, e.g. the possession of psychic powers such as *Dibbasota*, *Dibbacakkhu* or both as well as the abilities to fly in the sky, dive into the underworld, stay alive in the extreme heat or cold, extend life as long as possible, create comfortable environments

and minimize the difficulties of livelihood. Capitalism can make all this possible to those with access to capital, albeit not to everybody. At least they can say that “Anyone can fly AIRASIA.” So, a lot of people can now fly to someplace at a selected time. It does not come as a surprise, therefore, that people want to enjoy such ease and comfort. They can be happy, thanks to capitalism. So, they are bent on accumulating more money and property. Capitalism is no longer equated with materialism; rather, it provides power and comfort sought by most people. The number of people who enjoy them is living proof that everything is attainable. What it does not provide, however, is the ability to solve sufferings experienced by the mind or *Citta* induced by *Kilesa* and clouded by hatred, greed, delusion and other cravings or *Kāmatanha*. These elements are also causes of conflict. In several instances, money cannot buy solutions, especially when sufferings originate from egoism. The more capable capitalism is in making things happen, the more aggrandized egoism becomes. Sufferings are experienced on a more regular basis when a person’s *Citta* is clouded by *Kāmatanha*. In the world of reality, nothing is black and white. There are people who understand what capitalism is and who can make the most of it, especially those who adopt and practice *Buddhadhamma*. Those who lose are the ones who embrace capitalism in its extreme form or those who adhere to Buddhist traditions regardless of the changing reality.

Tradition is a keyword here. Let’s review the situation in which the number of monasteries is getting smaller or more monasteries are left without monks. In the olden days, when people accumulated enough money, they wanted to do something before they died as a preparation for the journey after life or to do something useful to society. What they did was build monasteries. Today, such investment takes a different form with more focus on one’s self and family. Investment no longer means building monasteries but includes such activities as education grants and hospital donations. There are now more choices. Certainly, people with a good understanding of *Buddhadhamma* who practice *Citta* development on a regular basis are better immune to capitalism. They can opt to adopt a comfortable way of life made possible by capitalism, or they choose to go without it. What the system provides is merely a tool which, if wisely

used, can lead to higher spiritual development and awareness. Again, there are people who, for all their spiritual practice, can succumb to *Kāmatañhā* stimulated by capitalism. And this is what seems to be the current situation in which decline is felt within the institution of Buddhism. Of course, this decline has nothing to do with Buddhism or its teachings. On the other hand, there are people who were born into capitalism and who have found that the system was sugar-coated with nothing substantial. They have come to better appreciate the value of Buddhism.

Yet, Buddhism in the future will not belong just to laity. Nor will it belong to *Saṅgha*, as some, if not many, of the ecclesiastical order cannot control their *Citta* and will more readily succumb to capitalism. In the future, those who enter monkhood must vow to be *Ariyasaṅgha*. The *Ariyasaṅgha* will continue to exist. Naturally, the number of monks will be smaller; those who stay will be only *Ariyasaṅgha* who retain their religious status under a set of conditions and in the contexts agreeable to them and the social environment. Meanwhile, laity will continue to grow as capitalism advances. The future generation of laypeople will learn how to reap profits from the system, while being able to resist capitalist lures and develop their *Citta* to an even higher level. Today, there are more young people who go to practice *Dhamma* at various religious places. Driven by capitalist pressures, they try to find their way out. Their counterparts in the past would seek refuge in socialism. Socialism has been in ruins for lack of moral purposes. As a matter of fact, it is just a form of materialism. Without some kind of control, it has turned into capitalism, as is happening in China and Vietnam. Today people have become more interested in the spiritual development than ever before. Whether their number will increase or decrease will depend on certain conditions. In short, all this is just a struggle between self and *Kilesa*. The latter comes in many devious guises. If we are not aware, we will lose out. In addition, capitalism could spell the end of humankind through, among other things, global warming and environmental degradation. These problems could strike so fast that humankind may come to an end. This is a possibility. If they happen gradually, the effect will not be readily felt. On the other hand, if their occurrence makes people re-think their ways of life, there

is still hope. How we can tackle the issue will depend on how fast it will emerge and hit us. We will have to wait and see.

At present, Buddhism seems to come out bruised. It is beset by many problems. A lot of monks are under the spell of material comfort. Fewer people enter monkhood. Fewer people go to the monastery to study Buddhism. More monasteries are left without resident monks. Hardly anyone mentions Buddhist studies or curriculums. Many Thais know little or nothing about Buddhism, and, even more importantly, they do not live their lives as Buddhists. All this makes us ponder how Buddhism can survive and continue to play its important role in the Thai society. In fact, capitalism and Buddhism have been locked in a struggle over the centuries. In the Buddha's time, there were spiritualists and materialists who pitted their wits against each other. Some were able to make their arguments into religious beliefs, while Buddhism has adhered to the middle path. In the midst of development, each society has come up with a number of coping mechanisms, whether they are religious, economic, social, political, educational or cultural, to ensure that it will reach its goal. Of these mechanisms, which is more dominant – political, economic, or politico-economic? The economic approach should take precedence. If Thailand faces economic problems, what approaches should it adopt? A social or religious approach cannot go off the economic path. Likewise, a Buddhist way of life has to constantly adjust itself to ensure its survival and to expand its base of influence. Constant monitoring, improvement and change are necessary just as capitalism has been subtly doing all along. Buddhism has to be revised. One has seen changes in spiritualism, theology and divinity. They need to change for survival. So, it can be said that a mindful change is the right solution.

For Buddhism to be able to remain here, Thai society needs to retain essential Buddhist elements despite being in the capitalist environment. It needs to be a capitalist Buddhist society. If the religion is alienated from the social mainstream, problems are bound to occur. A capitalist Buddhist society may make use of capitalist tools for religious purposes. Whatever one does, one must not forget the goals of Buddhism. One need not go as far as ending all desires or *Kilesa* like an *Arahant*. It suffices if a person

can live a happy life in a capitalist society as a good Buddhist, a good *Upāsaka/Upāsikā*.

In our attempts to adjust, we need to differentiate between form and content. The contents or essence of Buddhism will stay unchanged, while traditions and forms constantly undergo changes. While the dominance of capitalism may effect certain change of form, it cannot erode *Buddhadhamma* because of its absolute truth of life. As long as there is humanity, the truth will remain so, unmarred by any capitalist force. What we need to do is to strengthen our immunity against capitalism. Today, whether we like it or not, capitalism has become a very strong institution. The *Sangha* institution, once strong, is now weakened by capitalist influences. However, this does not mean that *Buddhadhamma* is destroyed. To combat capitalism, we must find leverage against it by knowing where its weaknesses lie. Two strategies are possible here. We can leverage against small points and see how they will affect the major part, or we tackle the major part head-on. It is advisable to do several small leverages to ensure that the major part is impacted. At the moment the situation is not hopeless. We still have two major *Sangha* universities where laypeople can study *Buddhadhamma*. We can make some adjustments here. The point is we must not get stuck with traditions or forms. To give a contemporary example, people today are addicted to a new form of social interaction, ironically called an “indifferent society”. While no harm is apparent yet, we can use it as a tool to disseminate correct information. At the same time *Sammatisangha* or conventional *Sangha* still enjoys much social support. So, we cannot decisively say right now whether capitalism or Buddhism prevails. The struggle is still on-going. Further conditions are needed to determine loss or victory. How then can we ensure positive winning conditions? At any rate, we must take into account the fact that we are laypeople who live and work in the capitalist society on a daily basis, and we want to live our lives mindfully. This is very important. With mindfulness, wisdom will be effectively exercised.

At the moment capitalism dominates almost the entire world. How is this possible? In religious terms, there are two economic systems: one based on greed, the other on happiness. If we are happy doing good deeds

to others, this is a win-win situation. On the other hand, greed-based economy involves fierce competition, resulting in winners and losers. If the winners feel pity for the losers, they will also become part of the losers. In this case, there are no outright winners. If we ask whether we expect the economy to come to the rescue, the answer is “not really.” Essentially, to appreciate the significance of Sufficiency Economy, we need to follow the principle of *Bhojanemattaññutā*, i.e. moderation in consumption. Unless you understand the principle, you will not appreciate sufficiency economy. After our country has gone through the era of Thaksinomics, our society has become ridden with greed. This poses a barrier to understanding sufficiency economy, as people tend to prejudge from the very start that the idea was never sufficient for them. On the other hand, on the subject of happiness, people tend to grasp Bhutan’s concept of “gross national happiness” more readily. They talk about happiness, while we focus on sufficiency. In fact, we should make a connection between them, making people happy and benevolent at the same time.

Another issue is how to use Buddhism in the management of people’s daily life in a capitalist society. For example, a funeral rite can provide a lot of opportunities to educate people about Buddhism. Instead of just traditional chanting, explanation can be added. It does not mean just a translation of the chant, but a translation with explanation. Chanting need not consist of four separate religious stanzas, as is traditionally practiced. It can be only one stanza. At the cremation, we may consider how a sermon should be delivered. We could come up with a general model that can be adopted or adjusted to suit each monastery. The occasion may be about death, but it can be extended to cover birth, aging, and sickness. Much happens between birth and death. What can monks do? For example, on aging, a lot of old people are abandoned. Why does the *Sangha* institution not come up with a project by which there is a monastery in every district to provide a care center for old people until their dying day on a paid or unpaid basis? Here we can apply the principles propounded by capitalism: good quality at an affordable price. Wealthy people will be drawn to the service. Once they are there, they will see how helping fellow beings is a Buddhist way of life and how assistance in the capitalist setting is more

profit-oriented. Another possibility is on the issue of children. There are monasteries in some countries in which children are dropped off after school while their parents are still at work. The monasteries provide computers and allow the children to play in the monastic environment filled with mutual kindness and assistance. Every activity in life, concerning birth, aging or sickness, could be easily turned into a subject of *Dhamma*. If such activities are part of a Buddhist way of life, Buddhism and life will never be separated. The religion can make use of any effective means made available by capitalism to manage people's life. The point is we do not do it for profit but rather for humanitarian purposes or for benefits of those who we target. In this way, people will feel that there is another dimension of life that has nothing to do with profit and loss. Eventually, when we come up with quality goods, people will come. To do this, we need a management system and a strong institution. In a strong capitalist society, we will use capitalist-based activities as a springboard to disseminate Buddhist goals and concepts to every social fabric. In this way, we will never leave behind the essence of Buddhism. On the other hand, if we do not faithfully adhere to this ideology, everything will be profit-oriented. In short, it is possible to make monasteries a place where people will come to make merits and do useful activities. A network of monasteries can be created to cover every province. With good monitoring, supervision and control, development is bound to happen. If we can create such a system, we can live in a capitalist society with full advantages. What we provide is affordable and good. Unlike capitalists, we are not profit-oriented. In this manner, Buddhism may be able to retain its significance in a capitalist society.