

***Ethical Principles and Economic Transformation: A Buddhist Approach.* Edited by László Zsolnai. London & New York: Springer, 2011. vii + 213 pages. Includes general bibliography, “about the authors,” and index. \$159.99 (hardcover and softcover), \$119.00 (eBook). ISBN 97848193103.**

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This is a collection of ten essays: an introduction and conclusion by the editor, and then eight essays divided into two sections. The first section, “Buddhist Ethics Applied to Economics,” comprises four essays: “The Relational Economy” by Julie A. Nelson, “Buddhism and Sustainable Consumption” by Peter Daniels, “Economic Sufficiency and Santi Asoke” by Juliana Essen, and “Pathways to a Mindful Economy” by Joel C. Magnuson. The next section is titled “Achieving Happiness and Peace.” While the first section presumes to identify universalizable Buddhist ethical principles, so this second section presumes to identify universalizable Buddhist ethical values—happiness and peace. The four essays in this section are “Do Our Economic Choices Make us Happy?” by Colin Ash, “Gross National Happiness” by Sander G. Tideman, “The Application of Buddhist Theory and Practice in Modern Organizations” by Bronwen Rees and Tamas Agocs, and “Leadership the Buddhist Way” by Laurens van den Muyzenberg.

The title of the first section, “Buddhist Ethics Applied to Economics,” can be taken as indicating one term of a semiotic opposition between “Buddhist economics” and the “economics of Buddhism.”¹ Buddhist economics identifies the prescriptive project of applying what are identified as universalizable Buddhist ethical principles to economic

1. See Elizabeth Williams-Ørberg, “Introduction: Buddhism and Economics,” in “Buddhism and Economics,” special focus, *Journal of Global Buddhism* 20 (2019): 19–29.

relations. In contrast, the economics of Buddhism identifies an academic project that attempts to understand the relation between Buddhist institutions and the economy of societies where Buddhism exists as an institution. While not limited to the individual, Buddhist economics largely references the individual person, their values, and their economic actions as the locus of inquiry. Buddhist economics on the other hand largely looks to institutional organizations as the locus of inquiry. In other words, Buddhist economics participates in the discourse of ethics rather than that of economics. As Matthew King has summarized, “Buddhist Economics is a thing quite apart from economics proper. It is instead a Buddhist scale of value aimed not only to confront but actually to absorb the authority of normative, ‘Western’ economics and the dominant forces of materialist development in Asia.”² The economic study of Buddhism extends the economic study of religion, itself a relatively new field, to the study of Buddhism.

As a personal note, let me say that I largely agree with the values expressed by the contributors to this collection. The criticisms below involve questioning the claims that those values are, somehow, Buddhist in nature. Rather than being based on research into the history and thought of Buddhism, in many cases it seems as if the label “Buddhist” is being attached to a value for the sake of its rhetorical value. For instance, an odd note is struck in the work’s preface when the editor suggests that the goals of Buddhism are the achievement of “happiness, peace and permanence” (p. v). As almost anyone who has taken an undergraduate world religions course knows, a central tenet of Buddhist thought is impermanence. Where then does this characterization (caricature?) of Buddhism come from?

CHAPTER 1, “WHY BUDDHIST ECONOMICS?,” LASZLO ZSOLNAI

“Why Buddhist Economics?” identifies the variety of themes found in the balance of the collection and simultaneously highlights the editor’s own conceptions of Buddhist praxis—that is, the interaction between doctrine and practice. Generally, economics only treats desire—the motivation for consumption—as a monolithic category. Zsolnai calls

2. Matthew King, “Buddhist Economics: Scales of Value in Global Exchange,” in *Oxford Handbooks Online* (7 Jul. 2016; DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935420.013.64), <https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935420.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199935420-e-64>.

attention to the distinction made by Payutto between *taṇhā* and *canda* (p. 5). The former is familiar as one of the “three poisons”—greed, cupidity, acquisitiveness; and as the second of the four noble truths—desire, thirst, etc.

An important example that elucidates Zsolnai’s conceptions regarding Buddhist praxis is his claim that “The purpose of the Buddhist agenda is to stop suffering” (p. 14). This is ambiguous, allowing for two opposing interpretations, one negative the other positive. The negative understanding of the cessation of suffering is simply the absence of suffering. However, a positive interpretation of the cessation of suffering as the only meaning is now widely and uncritically accepted and facilitates the popular image of Buddhism as the religion of happiness. Zsolnai notes this difference in interpretations when he clearly asserts that “happiness is not the ultimate goal of Buddhism. The cessation of suffering is” (p. 14).

CHAPTER 2, “THE RELATIONAL ECONOMY,” JULIE NELSON

Nelson addresses a key issue for contemporary discourse in Buddhist economics—how capitalism is conceived. As she notes, while many authors claim to ground their views in interdependence, their description of capitalism is that “the contemporary economic system is radically impersonal and non-relational” (p. 24). Taking her cue from those few authors who have asserted the possibility of an active Buddhist engagement within a capitalist system, she points out that the image of economies as driven by abstract and inhuman/e values is often asserted by proponents and critics alike is itself an artificial image. “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” (p. 28).

CHAPTER 3, “BUDDHISM AND SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION,” PETER DANIELS

At the interface of concerns regarding economics and ecology is the issue of consumption. Daniels points out that a simplistic interpretation of Buddhist doctrine as opposing consumption is not viable. Instead he proposes that

the Buddhist world view can inform and enrich the efforts to modify consumption into “sustainable consumption” forms that can bring about and sustain better quality of life and well-being for humans and the living environment of which they are a part. (p. 36)

The prescriptive part of his essay balances rather precariously between social action and neoliberal individualism. The latter seems evident when he prescribes two levels of change that would move toward sustainable consumption. “Firstly, we can reduce the environmental demands from what we purchase by minor, incremental shifts in the bundle of specific items that effectively provide the same levels and [of?] end-use services” (pp. 40–41). And, second, “sustainable consumption can occur via more profound changes in people’s overall consumption bundles or lifestyles” (p. 41). In Daniels’ view, “With this resolution upon demand-side aspects of the economy, Buddhism can help achieve sustainable consumption” (p. 42). The focus is, in other words, on individual consumption choices, that is, on demand, rather than supply. One of his examples is particularly revealing:

a shift from leisure activity based on jet skis, to yoga and hiking, would probably have very significant and positive environmental effects per unit leisure time or well-being service. Such a qualitative shift would be aligned with the reshaping of actual preferences into true preferences that truly yield satisfaction. (p. 52)

Considered closely, the language of “actual preferences” and “true preferences” seems rather confusing. Does it simply reveal the author’s own value judgment, his own personal preferences, about the worthiness of different kinds of leisure activities?

Here the rationale for such changes seems to be a typically neoliberal one that individual changes somehow accumulating to make a significant collective change. Fortunately, Daniels balances this with some proposed societal actions and indicates the dialectic between societal actions and individual education needed to support them.

CHAPTER 4, “ECONOMIC SUFFICIENCY AND SANTI ASOKE,” JULIANA ESSEN

More directly societal in orientation is Essen’s chapter. Like Daniels, Essen asserts that there is no inherent opposition between Buddhist and “mainstream Western economics.” Key to understanding the intellectual context of her essay is the claim that immediately follows: “Like its Western sibling, the Buddhist model is based on individual

rational choices concerning material well-being. The accumulation of wealth is even allowed and in many cases encouraged, contrary to popular belief (p. 62). Rational choice theory is more complex than can be explicated in brief here, but it is worth noting that what Essen calls the “Rational Buddhist Householder” is not simply identical with the reward-maximizing model of human beings hypothesized in rational choice theory. Essen claims that

The Buddhist sense of self is connected to other entities rather than being isolated, and an individual’s actions have consequences arising in a non-linear fashion, possibly resulting in a *karmic* boomerang. This undoubtedly expands an individual’s notion of “self-interest.” (p. 62)

Since no explanation or even citation is given for the claim regarding the “Buddhist sense of self,” it is difficult to understand how a relational self is compatible with the denial of a self.

As noted by Williams–Ørberg³, Max Weber is the still-looming figure in discussions of economics and religion. Essen notes that Weber distinguished between two kinds of rationality: instrumental rationality, which is the basis of rational choice theory, and “substantive or value rationality” (p. 62). The latter refers decision-making based on a person’s values, rather than a narrow sense of cost-benefits analysis. She goes on to discuss two economic models informed by Buddhist values, the Royal Thai Sufficiency Economy model, and the Santi Asoke Buddhist Reform Movement of Thailand.⁴ In keeping with her remodeling of rational choice theory, Essen ends her essay with a warning against understanding that she is suggesting “facilely replacing the dominant neoliberal economic model with a Buddhist one. Instead, economic pluralism is advocated, consisting of the myriad approaches to material and social wellbeing that are culturally and environmentally appropriate” (p. 75). As lyrically appealing as her image of “economic pluralism” is, everything we know about ideologically neoliberal

3. Williams–Ørberg, “Buddhism and Economics.”

4. See also Elizabeth Williams–Ørberg’s discussion of these and other similar movements in her essay “Buddhist Ethics in South and Southeast Asia,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Buddhist Ethics*, ed. Daniel Cozort and James Mark Shields (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018; online: DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198746140.013.9).

international agencies is that there is no commitment to economic pluralism, but rather to actively crushing alternative economic orders. Neoliberal ideologues will brook no pluralism.

CHAPTER 5, "PATHWAYS TO A MINDFUL
ECONOMY," JOEL C. MAGNUSON

Magnuson asserts that mindful economics addresses the economic problems endemic to American capitalism through a "holistic and systems analysis" (p. 79). Basing his claim on the work of Thich Nhat Hanh (*The Art of Power*, New York: Harper Collins, 1998), Magnuson engages in the rhetorical strategy of claiming that the views he is asserting are part of the original teachings of the Buddha.

As we work toward building a mindful economy, we are openly engaged as agents for social change. Such engagement was part of the Buddha's original teachings as he emphasized actively creating wholesome communities and social environments that will nurture individuals' wholesome thoughts and actions. (p. 79)

Magnuson then goes on to suggest a reinterpretation of the four noble truths in economic terms. The last of these, corresponding to the eightfold path, is that "the pathway for changing systems conditions in this framework begins at the local level where people and communities can, with appropriate mindfulness, evolve new community enterprises that will be the seeds that grow into a broader system of production that is centered on human and ecological well-being" (p. 80). Magnuson's approach is unusual in a field dominated by individually oriented solutions. In his analysis, the creation of what he calls "pathological systems" is not the result of "wrongheaded business practices and individual choices [but instead] such pathology is systemic and deeply woven into the institutional fabric of American society" (p. 88).

As his corollary to the fourth noble truth, Magnuson proposes the development of a mindful economy. This is an "evolutionary" proposal.

Our vision of a mindful economy is not rooted in revolutionary ideology. It is practically inconceivable that a massive \$11 trillion dollar economy can be fundamentally altered in a peaceful or meaningful way through a sudden revolutionary catharsis.... Capitalism and all other major economic systems that have existed historically were originally small and localized systems. In a mindful economy, smaller-scale local economic systems are not enclaves of economic utopias or communes, they are merely the starting places from which

a broader and more comprehensive system can evolve and grow. (p. 100)

Clearly central to Magnuson's proposal is the idea of a mindful economy, for which he offers a description of mindfulness that accords with the standard modern interpretation, including the problematic presumption that practicing mindfulness automatically leads to ethical transformation. Following a longer summary of mindfulness as "being in the present moment," he concludes the description by saying,

Cultivated over time with practice, mindfulness allows us to be present in our minds and directly engaged in our daily tasks without delusion or attachment. But these tasks are not random, they are directed toward bringing about human and ecological well-being and this will involve playing a role in institutional and systemic change. (p. 99)

Much, particularly the "Buddhist" character of his proposal, hinges on this claim. It is problematic that what we can call modern mindfulness automatically creates an ethical orientation. The problem here, as with most such treatments, is confusing a state of meditative practice with the goal. While one may engage in meditation without goal directed attachments, how is it possible to effect "institutional and systemic change" without goal directed attachments? Engaging in daily tasks "without delusion" sounds good, but it is pure rhetoric, since the understanding of what constitutes delusion is hardly obvious, and defining it immediately involves one in doctrinal claims and about "being somewhere other than the present moment."

CHAPTER 6, "DO OUR ECONOMIC CHOICES MAKE US HAPPY?," COLIN ASH

Ash undertakes a three-way comparative project between economics, psychology, and Buddhism around the topic of happiness. This essay is well-informed by Buddhist thought, delving into abhidharma categories in its discussion. There are, however, two points at which the contemporary psychologized understanding of Buddhism leads into problematic interpretations that then become the bases for later argumentation. First, to develop his three-way comparison, Ash reinterprets the teaching of "dependent origination" not as ontologically descriptive, but rather as "a psychological conditioning process driven by deep cognitive errors" (p. 111). Although he develops this more fully later in the essay, in a fashion that is more consistent with standard Buddhist thought, it is still this summary of dependent origination as

a psychological matter that provides the basis for the equivalences he draws in relation to psychology and economics. Because he is starting from a psychologized interpretation of Buddhism, the comparisons with psychology constitute a *petitio principii* fallacy. Second, starting with this psychologized understanding, he goes on to claim that the “Buddhist therapeutic response [is] meditative mind training” (p. 111). Like so much of contemporary self-help Buddhism and mindfulness training, this focus on the mental seems to simply conflate right mindfulness and right concentration, while ignoring the other six members of the eightfold path.

Also problematic is his conclusion that because self-report of happiness correlates with physiological measures, such as “serotonin levels, blood flow, oxygen uptake, electrical activity in different parts of the brain, and fMRI scans,” that happiness “is, in principle, as measurable as blood pressure. Economists can begin to take happiness seriously because self-reported subjective well-being is now shown to have objective validity” (p. 113). He goes on to discuss several factors that affect subjective happiness, such as adaptation (habituation) and social comparison (rivalry). Overall this discussion demonstrates that increasing wealth does not produce increasing happiness. That said, Ash goes on to prescribe mindfulness as the solution—while noting that were it not for the fact that the “*Dhamma* however offers skillful means not just of improving psycho-physical conditions but of realizing the unconditioned” (p. 125), mindfulness might just fall subject to the same problems as other attempts to generate happiness. The consequence is summarized by Ash when he asserts that the goal of Buddhism is not happiness, but the elimination of suffering.

CHAPTER 7, “GROSS NATIONAL HAPPINESS,” SANDER G. TIDEMAN

As is well known now, the kingdom of Bhutan adopted a measure of societal performance based on “gross national happiness” (GNH), which involves an understanding of happiness as something that can be quantified, as argued for by Ash in the preceding chapter. For example, Tideman claims that happiness is an appropriate economic measure that is supported by “breakthrough research—in quantum physics, medicine, biology, behavioral science, psychology and cognitive science—[which] is now making the science of mind relevant to economics” (p. 134), a wide ranging set of disciplines for which the actual relations to economics are not explained.

One of Tideman's themes is commonplace in discussions of Buddhist economics, probably because it contrasts with simplistic conceptions of Puritanical rejection of wealth as inherently evil. That theme is that a "true Buddhist person not only seeks wealth lawfully and spends it for the good, but also enjoys spiritual freedom" (p. 135). It is here again important to note that Tideman extends the ethical dimension of Buddhist teachings beyond the individual by referencing the three categories of violence discussed by Sulak Sivaraksa—inner, outer, and structural. As a dimension of concern, structural violence pushes Buddhist practice beyond the kind of individual focus found in self-help Buddhism into social concerns as well.

A broader issue for the conversation between Buddhism and economics that Tideman touches on is whether the characterization of human existence as primarily individual and competitive is descriptive or prescriptive. Since such characterizations can naturalize certain values (prescriptions) by treating them as descriptive, it is important to question their status. Tideman cites Alan Wallace's analysis of "scientific materialism" as establishing that the view of human existence as one motivated by "survival of the fittest" is simply a "belief system" (p. 137). While examining the way that values are naturalized is important, there still seems to be some intellectual validity to what is called in philosophic jargon the "is/ought" distinction, that is, facts and values. In other words, it does seem to me that an appropriate balance would include acknowledging a biological dimension of human existence that includes both social and individual, both cooperative and competitive motivations, and that neither side of that balance can be dismissed as simply a belief system. At the same time, as Tideman (following Schumacher) points out, contemporary legal systems are themselves severely out of balance toward the individualistic and competitive. And it is an important critique to question the kinds of measures employed in economics.

Unfortunately, Tideman makes a mistake that seems to indicate that his familiarity with Buddhist thought is mediated through popular religious culture. He makes the philosophical idealist claim that "Modern physics, cognitive sciences, Buddhism and most of the world's spiritual teachings tell us that we make up reality, so likewise it must be us who make up the economy" (p. 140). There are several aspects of this that are problematic. First, the idealist interpretation of quantum physics is not relevant on any scale other than that of quantum

relations. Even if quantum effects were somehow mysteriously controlled by the mind, that hardly justifies the conclusion that “we make up reality.” Similarly, since what it means to “make up reality” is not defined, it is not clear that the cognitive sciences can be cited as having drawn that conclusion. Buddhism is being treated here as a single, uniform system of thought, which while it does have strains that can be interpreted as idealist, is not monolithic in that interpretation. And, the rhetoric of “world’s spiritual teachings” becomes even more vague, having only the rhetorical weight that follows from Perennialism being widely and uncritically accepted. The over-balancing is evident when Tideman declares that “Clearly, the 19th century ‘matter only’ world-view has been turned on its head” (p. 141). Despite its problematic acceptance of popular truisms regarding the congruence of Buddhism and modern science, Tideman’s valuable contribution is to shift the focus of the discussion about Buddhism and economics in such a fashion as to include societal concerns in the form of structural violence.

CHAPTER 8, “THE APPLICATION OF BUDDHIST THEORY AND
PRACTICE IN MODERN ORGANIZATIONS,”
BRONWEN REES AND TAMAS AGOCS

Rees and Agocs focus on the present problems found in organizational life. Despite attempts to appear to support equality and the rights of the individual, present-day organizations are divisive and secretive. They say that “modern systems have failed to take into account the human need for community and shared working, where a healthy working out of the relationships between group and individual could take place in a shared dialogue” (p. 155). They highlight the individualized character of employee–employer relations in the post-Thatcher/Reagan neoliberal world. Trades unions have been enfeebled by being systematically demonized, and employees are set in competition with one another.

In their analysis of how this situation came about, they turn to Foucault and his view of subtle power as being maintained by “documenting and depicting behavior in specific spheres of activity” (p. 157). In contemporary organizations, those who define behaviors and control the means of documenting it hold power over those who don’t. Such imbalances of power and practices of secrecy are held by the authors to be responsible for high levels of depression in workers.

One of the authors established a “team of Buddhist meditation teachers and psychotherapists” to address these organizational issues. Following Buddhist modernist conceptions, the authors here employ the artifice that practice and ideology are autonomous from one another. “Unlike other monotheistic religions, which requires either a set of beliefs or a revealed truth, Buddhism can be conceived of as a set of practices, a methodology, through which one can gain a greater sense of interconnectedness, and ‘transcend’ an isolated sense of self” (p. 158). The merely rhetorical function of this claim can be made evident by restating it as a claim about a different religious tradition: “Unlike the other theistic religions, which require a set of beliefs or a revealed truth, Protestantism can be conceived of as a set of practices, a methodology of prayer, through which one can gain a greater sense of connectedness to the divine, and ‘transcend’ an isolated sense of self.”

In application, the development of a meditation-based approach to organizational problems required “translating Buddhist meditational practices and its underlying philosophy of ‘no-self’ into a language and form that could help transform organizational life—into a form that could lead to a sense of greater interconnectedness and hence a value system that is based on collaboration rather than competition” (p. 159). Translating “no-self” is itself an ideological act.

The methodology employed in the study described is identified as “action research,” which the authors tell us “differs from other forms of qualitative and quantitative research in that it does not try to just describe a static situation. Action research engages with an ongoing situation and, if possible, brings about change through collaborative action” (p. 160). The process is described in terms of alchemy and embodiment, and shares with other essays a Perennialist attitude. Speaking of what they call the “reflective ground”—the physical and emotional space within which change is possible—the authors claim that the idea of an “interpenetrating and interdependent field of human activity” operating beyond a mechanistic understanding of cause and effect is shared by “many cultures and traditions” including: “Sufi, Hindu, Buddhist, Shamanic or pre-enlightenment Europe” (p. 163). Unfortunately, this is the kind of sweepingly broad claim that is meaningless except as a rhetorical flourish. The authors fail to explain even what this might mean in terms of Buddhism, which might at least be expected in a volume on Buddhist economics.

CHAPTER 9, "LEADERSHIP THE BUDDHIST WAY,"
LAURENS VAN DEN MUYZENBERG

Having worked with H. H. Dalai Lama over a ten-year period, the author extrapolates a series of Buddhist principles relevant to improving management practices, that is, operating within the framework of the established capitalist system. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the pursuit of happiness is taken as fundamental, while impermanence follows as second. Thus, "Buddhist leadership is based on facilitating and producing happiness in a constantly changing process" (p. 168). The leader is responsible for leading from their own insight, and thus right view and right conduct, together with meditation practice, are deemed the core of a Buddhist view of leadership.

Based on the work of Chester Barnard, one of the founders of management theory and organizational sociology, the author proposes a series of what he considers to be "Buddhist principles," including faith, satisfaction, cooperation, and incessant interchanges of energy, to which the author adds coherence (pp. 174–175)—though just what makes these principles "Buddhist" is sketchy at best. Typical of this latter difficulty is the claim that an "important Buddhist principle is that important decisions should only be made after different and competing plans of actions have been compared and evaluated" (p. 177). The "Buddhist" character of this principle is not supported by any citation to any source at all, canonic or modern.

CHAPTER 10, "THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF BUDDHIST
ECONOMICS," LASZLO ZSOLNAI

This concluding chapter attempts to draw together the collection, highlighting common themes. These include critiques of mainstream economics (Nelson, Essen, Tideman), sustainability and right livelihood (Daniels, Essen), the happiness problem (Ash), economic models (Essen, Tideman, Magnusson), organizational solutions (Rees and Agocs, van den Muyzenberg), and non-utopian thinking (Nelson). This is followed by a bibliography.

SUMMARY

Taken together the work demonstrates that Buddhist economics is still very much a work in progress. The authors are for the most part grounded in economics and business. Only one is trained in Buddhist

studies, though several are practicing Buddhists. While this is a sincere effort toward establishing a dialogical relation between economics and business management on one side, and Buddhism on the other, the Buddhist side of the dialogue seems to be largely second-, or even third-, hand. One of the failings of Buddhist modernism that consistently distorts dialogical efforts is the belief that being a meditator is sufficient to make one an authority on Buddhist thought. Indeed, this feels uncomfortably like a kind of Orientalist presumption that Westerners have a privileged position regarding the ability to assert what is and isn't Buddhism.

Without explicitly saying so, several of the contributions to this collection seem to embrace a kind of Buddhist “Middle Way” economics, which James Mark Shields suggests presents itself as a middle way between “full acceptance of ‘economic life’ and a blanket rejection of such.”⁵ He describes “the standard conception of this middle path as a form of ‘moderation’—understood here as accepting the basic premises and practices of prevailing economic systems, particularly late industrial global capitalism, while providing cautionary provisions against their excesses.”⁶

Almost without exception the contributions to the collection operate on what Maria Heim, citing a phrase from Frank Reynolds, has identified as a holistic approach to discussions of ethics in Buddhism.⁷ This is the idea that the appropriate framework for understanding any aspect of Buddhism is the tradition in its entirety. Quoting Reynolds, Heim explains the “argument for a ‘holistic understanding’ of the tradition in which ethics is embedded, arguing that ‘the distinctive configurations of elements that constitute each tradition must be taken very seriously into account when the interpretation of any particular element is being considered.’”⁸

5. James Mark Shields, “Buddhist Economics: Problems and Possibilities,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Buddhist Ethics*, ed. Daniel Cozort and James Mark Shields (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018; DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198746140.013.28), 409.

6. Shields, “Buddhist Economics,” 409.

7. Maria Heim, “Toward a ‘Wider and Juster Initiative’: Recent Comparative Work in Buddhist Ethics,” *Religion Compass* 1, no. 1 (2007): 107–119, 109; DOI: 10.1111/j.1749-8171.2006.00009.x.

8. Internal citation is to Frank Reynolds, “Ethics and Wealth in Theravāda Buddhism: A Study of Comparative Religious Ethics,” in *Ethics, Wealth, and*

As a method of interpretation, this kind of “holistic understanding” entails a covert presumption that the interpreter already knows “the distinctive configurations of elements that constitute each tradition.” This is another version of the “angelic perception” or “the view from above” that claims the authority of knowing and representing the entirety of the tradition, or at least its important elements and their “distinctive configuration.” Any individual interpreter is, however, located in some specific socio-cultural time and place. The holistic approach obscures the selective process by which the understanding of a tradition’s “distinctive configuration” is constructed. This is an act in Sartrean bad faith in that the interpreter defers the authority of the interpretation to the “distinctive configuration” they have themselves constructed.

Also, with few exceptions, the focus of ethics focuses on the individual and is framed in terms of what the individual person should do to follow Buddhist principles. This kind of ethics, that is, individualistic prescription, is in accord with neoliberal focus on the individual as the sole agent. Such a perspective ignores the power of social structures, and the exceptions to the general focus on the individual here are the discussions of consumption in an environmental perspective (Daniels), structural violence (Tideman), and the power of depicting and documenting behaviors in institutions (Rees and Agocs).

Centrally problematic to the project of “Buddhist economics” is that it fosters the Western conception, rooted in monotheism, that ethics follows from religious identity and that religiously based ethics are absolutist. And consequently, much of the argumentation seems to employ uncritically a structure of Western religious ethical reasoning, simply substituting “Buddhist” for “Christian,” and “Dharma” for “God.” The reasoning employed in an identity-based ethics seems to be something like:

1. I am a Buddhist.
 2. Buddhists believe in the interconnectedness of all things.
- Therefore, I recycle.

Such approaches only contribute to the fragmentation of society into different religious identities, which despite well-intended efforts to

Salvation, ed. R. Sizemore and D. Swearer (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1990), 60.

reach across boundaries, further reify those boundaries in that very way of thinking. And it would seem to be contradictory for a tradition that radically deconstructs the idea of a substantive personal identity to then employ that very notion in its ethics.

