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The Wisdom of Need: Basic Goods Provision in Buddhist Economic Ethics

Kenneth A. Reinert¹

Abstract

Human beings have basic needs, and these needs must be addressed through the provision of basic goods and services. This article reviews the role of basic goods in Buddhist economic ethics, both traditional and contemporary. It suggests that basic goods provision deserves particular attention in economic considerations and that such attention is fully consistent with both Buddhist economic ethics and the idea of moral minimalism in political philosophy. The article proposes and discusses basic goods in the form of “eight requisites,” a modification of the traditional Buddhist “four requisites” of food, clothing, shelter, and medicine.

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Introduction

The First Noble Truth in Buddhism is the truth of suffering (*duḥkha*). Traditionally, suffering is conceived of as existential or psychological in the face of transitory existence (impermanence, *anitya*) and the absence of a secure, separate self (emptiness, *śūnyatā*). But there is also a recognition of “ordinary suffering” (*duḥkha-duḥkha*), including suffering from material deprivations and consequent ill health (Rahula 19). This article is concerned with the ordinary suffering arising from failures to meet basic human needs. It emphasizes that addressing these basic human needs requires the provision of what I have termed basic goods and services or just “basic goods” (“No Small Hope,” *No Small Hope*). The article reviews the role of basic goods in both economics and Buddhist economic ethics, both traditional and contemporary. It draws parallels between Buddhist thought in this area and the notion of moral minimalism in political philosophy. Finally, the article proposes and discusses basic goods in the form of “eight requisites,” a modification of the traditional Buddhist “four requisites” of food, clothing, shelter, and medicine.

What Are Basic Goods?

There are many ways to think about basic goods, but from the viewpoint of Buddhist economics ethics, a productive starting point is the *wisdom of need*. The wisdom of need recognizes that humans (and potentially other sentient beings) have basic needs that are universal or common to all, that take precedence over other potential human concerns, and involve minimum thresholds below which life becomes precarious. This precariousness makes human flourishing (including realization of Buddha nature) difficult or even impossible, and this is why addressing basic needs through the adequate provision of basic goods and services is an ethical

issue. The basic Buddhist notion of compassion (*karuṇā*) draws our attention to alleviating deprivations in basic goods provision.

One potential list of basic goods and services includes nutritious food, clean water, sanitation services, health services, education services, housing, electricity, and human security services (Reinert, *No Small Hope*). Such a list is not the last word on basic goods but serves as a useful starting point. It is one we will turn to later in this article.

Basic Goods in Economics

An emphasis on basic goods and services provision does have some precedents in economic thinking. Notably, Adam Smith effected a shift of thought from a focus on precious metals (gold and silver in the school of thought known as mercantilism) to the consumption of goods and services by all members of society. As part of his emphasis on the consumption of goods and services, Smith had a notion of “necessaries.” It is true that Smith’s conception of necessities was set out as being, at least in part, socially determined and the deprivation of necessities as having a significant psychic component. However, as stressed by Gilbert, Smith was also aware of the material implications of falling below subsistence levels of necessities, including such things as infant and child mortality.

Subsequently, Cambridge University economist Alfred Marshall made a distinction between “necessaries” or “things required to meet wants which must be satisfied” and “comforts or luxuries” or “things that meet wants of a less urgent character.” In this way, Marshall recognized a distinction between *needs* and *wants*, and this allowed for the recognition that some goods are more important than others. While this distinction mattered to Marshall mostly because of the impact of different types of consumption on “character,” Parsons has emphasized that Marshall was

very much aware of needs as a part of the “standard of life” as opposed to “comfort” and “artificial wants.”

Marshall’s colleague and protégé, Arthur Pigou, continued in this vein and identified a *minimum standard* of needs satisfaction. These distinctions have some resonance in the Buddhist ethics literature as well. For example, Sivaraksa stated that “In raising the standard of living, it is imperative that items of necessity are distinguished from those of luxury” (*Seeds* 30). In this manner, economics of old meets contemporary Buddhist thought.

Modern economics has largely cast aside the distinction between needs and want, treating needs as just another type of want or preference. Despite this habit of downplaying the role of need, however, needs do make an appearance now and then and have been shown to have both theoretical and empirical validity. This has been done, for example, by Baxter and Moosa, who characterized needs in a number of different ways. Basic needs are *universal* in the sense that they are common to all individuals. They are *hierarchical* because they take precedence over non-basic consumption. Even more importantly, they are *irreducible* in that there is a minimum threshold of basic goods consumption below which human life becomes compromised and even precarious. This irreducible quality is what makes basic needs, and the basic goods that satisfy these needs, a part of economic ethics.

Basic Goods in Buddhist Economic Ethics

Basic goods do make a number of appearances in Buddhist ethical traditions. To show this, we will consider the Edicts of Aśoka, Nāgārjuna’s *Royal Counsels*, the Perfection of Wisdom sūtras, the *Upāsaka Precepts Sūtra*, and more modern expressions. We begin with the Edicts of Aśoka.

The Edicts of Aśoka

The Edicts of Aśoka have been described by Nikam and McKeon as “the proclamations of a man who had acquired enormous power but who had undergone a change of heart” (viii). Among other ways, Emperor Aśoka expressed this change of heart through rock, pillar, and cave edicts. These he saw as expressions of Dharma, in the sense of that which guides human action and interaction. Indeed, in Pillar Edict II, Aśoka stated that Dharma “consists of few sins and many good deeds” (41). In the interpretation of Nikam and McKeon, Aśoka displayed in his edicts “a concern with the material welfare and happiness of his people” (3), the influence of Dharma on “charity” (7), a universal “conception of morality” (16), and “human kinship and dignity” (22). The edicts were thus a statement of ethics, albeit in the 3rd century BCE.

In a few instances, Aśoka’s edicts touched upon basic goods and services. In Pillar Edict VII, for example, Aśoka directed his “high officials” to take care of the “distribution of gifts” to “worthy recipients of charity” with the goal of “promoting compassion, liberality, truthfulness, purity, gentleness, and goodness” (35). In Rock Edict XI, he refers to the “distribution of wealth through Dharma” (44). More specifically, Rock Edict II stated: “Everywhere provision has been made for two kinds of medical treatment, treatment for men and for animals. Medicinal herbs . . . have been imported and planted wherever they were not previously available. Also, where roots and fruits were lacking, they have been imported and planted. Wells have been dug and trees planted along the roads for the use of men and animals” (64). Similarly, Pillar Edict VII stated: “I have ordered mango groves to be planted. I have ordered wells to be dug . . . and I have ordered rest houses built. I have had many watering stations built for the convenience of man and animals” (64).

Aśoka's edicts fall far short of a complete ethics of need. But they were issued at a time before any complete ethical system of human welfare existed. In this sense, they are very significant and not just centuries, but millennia ahead of their time. They are also evidence of a first instance when Buddhist ethics, human need, and actual policy converged in a constructive way. This sort of convergence is largely absent even today.

Nāgārjuna's Royal Counsels

The Mahāyāna philosopher Nāgārjuna lived centuries after King Aśoka, and he is most well-known for his fundamental contributions to Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy, what T. P. Kasulis called “the logic of emptiness.” Less well-known is his practical advice to his friend and student King Uday in the form of his *Royal Counsels* or *Letters to a Friend*. Robert Thurman provided an insightful analysis of these *Royal Counsels*, including the ways Nāgārjuna addressed basic goods provision to meet human needs. Thurman considered Nāgārjuna's expressed social policy to be one of “compassionate socialism,” but it might be better thought of as a system of welfare policy, albeit a millennium and a half ahead of its time. Let us consider a few elements of this welfare policy.

Nāgārjuna essentially called for a universal health system to “dispel the sufferings of children, the elderly, and the sick” (240). Among other things, this system was to involve the distribution of medicines. In the realm of food and water, he called for the provisioning of “seasonal food, drink, vegetables, grains, and fruits” (244). He also introduced the idea of strategic grain reserves to be used in times of scarcity. The spirit of Nāgārjuna is well expressed in his exhortation to King Uday to “cause the blind, the sick, the humble, the unprotected, the destitute, and the crippled all equally to attain food and drink without omission” (320). He

also put a great deal of emphasis on education in the form of “centers of teaching” (310-311), including the choice of teaching staff (319, 322).

It is striking how a philosopher of Mahāyāna emptiness who so effectively delved into issues of logic and existential phenomenology could have turned so effortlessly to the practical issues of governance down to the details of universal basic goods provisioning. Why pay attention of the needs of temporary, empty human beings? This was perhaps captured by Francis Cook who noted in his commentary on Dōgen’s *Shōbōgenzō* that “beings may be empty, but that emptiness has the form of beings who bleed and weep” (41). This recognition is something that Thurman stressed, namely, *mahākaruṇā* or “great empathy.” Thurman goes so far as to say that “the ground . . . of compassion is emptiness” (9). It is perhaps in this spirit that Nāgārjuna wrote his *Royal Counsels*.

The perfection of generosity

Another strand of needs-based thinking can be found in the Mahāyāna tradition in the form of the Six Perfections or *pāramitās*. In particular, the first Perfection, the Perfection of Generosity, is quite relevant. The Six Perfections were introduced in a number of “Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras,” which propose what Wright called “ethical practices” not entirely unlike the Aśoka ethics and Nāgārjuna’s *Counsels*. The Perfection of Generosity is indeed the *first* perfection, followed by morality, tolerance, energy, meditation, and wisdom. In the sūtras, the Perfection of Generosity is explicitly linked to the provision of food, water, clothing, and shelter, although it extends beyond these material “gifts” to the gift of Dharma itself.

The Perfection of Generosity reflects the Buddhist notion of interdependent origination or dependent arising (*pratitya-samutpada*). In one possible interpretation, this involves a recognition of the centrality of

reciprocity in human (and non-human) existence. As noted by Wright, this insight “dissolves previous habits of self-protection and self-aggrandizement, opening the ‘self’ to others in a connection of compassionate identification” (23). In an alternative approach, reciprocity is a possibility but not necessarily an ideal. For example, Ricard acknowledges the role of “reciprocal altruism” as allowing “constructive relationships to be woven between members of society” (88), but he also notes that “selfless altruism” is also a potential reality that deserves “a larger place in our existence” (93).

Whether in the form of reciprocal or selfless altruism, these are not merely individual activities. As Wright also noted, “one thing that Mahayana Buddhist authors realized . . . is that generosity is best understood as an achievement of a whole society and not simply of individuals within that society” (29). In this way, Wright implied that the Perfection of Generosity is, at some level, a matter of *policy*. Buddhists are often reluctant to pursue this course of thinking, but Wright is not. He stated: “Much of the pointless suffering in the world can be alleviated through intelligent political action, and any contemporary account of the perfection of generosity will need to acknowledge this” (47). Wright suggested that this intelligent approach to policy involves understanding and treating causes of scarcity, and we will return to this below.

If the Perfection of Generosity is a collective endeavor that includes policy, it needs to be thought through. This brings in two related Buddhist concepts: wisdom (*prajñā*) and skillful means (*upāya*). On the first of these, Ricard noted that compassion and wisdom “have to be intimately united, like the two wings of a bird” (692). Similarly, Okumura noted that “generosity without wisdom can be harmful. We must understand *what is really needed* before we can help someone” (137, emphasis added). In other words, *needs assessment* is required. But skillful means is also necessary, as was pointed out by Wright:

If we are both open to help and notice when help is needed, but are mistaken and ineffectual in how we go about it, then what we intend as an act of generosity may in fact just compound the difficulties The skills required in the ideal of generosity are complex and varied; they cover a broad range of abilities from initial perception to effective follow-through, including the skill to know when to stop giving. (33)

A similar point was made by Ricard:

To want to rush headlong into working for the good of others, without getting prepared first, is like wanting to carry out a medical operation immediately in the street, without taking the required time to learn medicine and build hospitals. (678)

To use a term we will take up in a short while, the Perfection of Generosity requires a sharp focus on *provisioning processes*. The policy analysis and design to move from an embrace of the Perfection of Generosity to wise and skillful provisioning of basic goods and services is no small task. But as we will see, the welfare of hundreds of millions of our fellow human beings requires it.

Upāsaka Precepts Sūtra

The Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras are well known and much discussed. Less well known is the *Upāsaka Precepts Sūtra* analyzed by Chappell. Like the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras, the *Upāsaka Precepts Sūtra* is a Mahāyāna text but one focused on the lay practitioner (*upāsaka*). Generosity based on compassion is a central theme, as is skillful means. The precepts covered

are relatively expansive but include specific instructions to care for the poor and for the sick.

According to Chappell, the sūtra includes “an extended description of various social welfare projects that a lay bodhisattva should undertake—including such practical ventures as learning medicine, building hospitals, repairing roads, building guest houses, digging wells, planting fruit trees, building bridges, maintaining canals, protecting animals . . . and consoling the grieving” (364). Perhaps more fundamentally, Chappell concluded that “what is distinctive about the *Upāsaka* is its emphasis on being practical. It assumes the value of conventional social and physical existence” (366). Practically addressing human physical existence inevitably enters into the realm of human need. Indeed, Chappell identified in the sūtra “a clear goal of trying to heal those in physical distress” (368), a focus “on the needs of other individuals in society” (370), and an emphasis on giving “practical material help to others” (p370). The wisdom of need is clearly present in the *Upāsaka Precepts Sūtra*.

Modern expressions

There are modern expressions of the role of basic goods and services in Buddhist economic ethics. For example, P. A. Payutto touched upon this issue tangentially in his well-known *Buddhist Economics*. Payutto placed this book within the context of a story about the Buddha insisting that a hungry peasant be fed before being able to listen to a discourse. In this story, the Buddha stated that “when people are overwhelmed, and in pain through suffering, they are incapable of understanding Dhamma” (3). It is notable that the suffering referred to here is that of physical deprivation (*duḥkha-duḥkha*). Payutto also made a distinction between wise consumption based on discriminative knowledge and unwise consumption that reflects a lack of discriminative knowledge. He considered wise consump-

tion to be part of the Noble Eightfold Path in the form of Right Livelihood. He recognized that wants are unlimited and extend beyond well-being. In doing so, he echoed the words of political philosopher James Griffin that “the trouble is that one’s desires spread themselves so widely over the world that their objects extend far outside the bound of what, with any plausibility, one could take as touching one’s well-being” (17). This fact was also pointed to by Brown, who stated that “Buddhist economics holds that the endless formation of desires causes suffering” (85).

Payutto examined what he terms the “quality of demand” and made a distinction between two kinds of wants or desires. There is the desire for “pleasurable experience” (*taṇhā*) and the desire for “true well-being” (*chanda*). This is somewhat rhetorical, but one can treat it as a distinction between want and need. Indeed, occasionally Payutto does just this, putting the provision of the “four requisites” of food, shelter, clothing, and medicine on the social agenda. He stated that if “people are deprived of the four requisites, this will interfere or prevent people’s intellectual and wisdom development, which is essential to culture and civilization and constitutes the greatest blessing of a human life” (5). This point was echoed in Essen when she stated that “in Buddhist economics, the provisioning of basic material needs—food, clothing and medicine—serves as the foundation for spiritual advancement” (73), as well as in Brown when she stated that “In Buddhist economics . . . (e)veryone is assumed to have the right to a comfortable life with access to basic nutrition, health care, education, and the assurance of safety and human rights” (2).

Buddhist appreciation of human needs, and the basic goods that address these needs, is also recognized in a negative sense in the disvaluing of goods that cause human harm. This is in sharp contrast to mainstream economic thinking that views all types of consumption as “welfare-enhancing” because it increases the utility of consumption. This economic tradition goes back to the writings of Jevons, who, in 1905, stated:

“Even that which is hurtful to a person may by ignorance be desired, purchased and used; it has then utility. Objects intended for immoral or criminal purposes . . . also have utility; the fact that they are desired by certain persons, and are accordingly manufactured, sold, and bought, establishes the fact” (12). Modern Buddhists of all stripes would question this view.

This distinction is perhaps most evident in the modern interpretation of the Right Livelihood aspect of the Noble Eightfold Path as a condemnation of weapons manufacture. Take, for example, the Dalai Lama. He stated: “If through weapons we could achieve real, lasting peace, all right. Let all factories be turned into weapons factories. Spend every dollar for that, if that will achieve definite, lasting peace. But it is impossible. Weapons do not remain stockpiled. Once a weapon is developed, sooner or later someone will use it The result is that innocent people get killed” (Gyatso 7). Sulak Sivaraksa (“Buddhism in a World of Change”) made a similar point, explicitly recognizing the contribution of weapons to conflict and the ways that conflict undermine development processes in lower-income countries.

Some support for this Buddhist approach to addressing need in economic policy is to be found in feminist economics. For example, Julie Nelson called for refocusing “economics on the provisioning of human life, that is, on the commodities and processes necessary to human survival” (32). She also stated that “such a definition of economics . . . does not rule out the study of the provision of conveniences or luxuries as well as more basic needs, but it does not give them equal priority” (33). The setting of such relative priorities is at the core of Buddhist economics ethics and the wisdom of need.

Connections to Moral Minimalism and the Capabilities Approach

Before considering in some more depth the potential role of basic goods in Buddhist economic ethics, it will be useful to recognize that there is a strong connection between the Buddhist considerations just described and a tradition in political philosophy known as *moral minimalism*. There is actually much that can be said about this connection, particularly in the realm of human rights (e.g., Hertel and Minkler), but we will limit ourselves to some basic remarks. Moral minimalism was described by Walzer as “a simplified . . . morality” (17) and by Shue as the “morality of the depths” or “the line beneath which no one is allowed to sink” (18). It was described by Braybrooke as the “rock bottom” (131) of ethics. Overall, moral minimalism attempts to establish the logic for preventing individuals from falling below a certain level in their material provisions or in their larger circumstances.

In this tradition, Braybrooke defined basic needs as “essential to living or to function normally” and emphasized a “minimum standard of provision” deserving “precautionary priority” that helps to define ethical obligations (31). He noted that “questions about whether needs are genuine, or well-founded, come to the end of the line when the needs have been connected to life and health” (31). To put it another way, real needs are developmentally related to human lives. They are more essential than wants or desires.

Henry Shue linked moral minimalism to human rights, a realm quite relevant to Buddhist economic ethics. Shue noted that even negative, political rights require positive action in the form of basic human security services, judicial services, and legal services. They do not exist in and of themselves but must be provided. More fundamentally, negative political rights cannot be enjoyed without basic subsistence rights being met. The subsistence needs emphasized by various strands of Buddhist reflection (e.g., P. A. Payutto’s “state of sufficiency that meets the needs of a

majority of the people” [53]) therefore apply directly to basic rights in the form of subsistence rights and meld nicely with a fundamental statement of human rights.

The embrace of moral minimalism in Buddhist economic ethics moves it beyond Buddhism itself into a larger realm that Sissela Bok has referred to as *common*. Common ethics in Bok’s view are composed of “a limited set of values so down-to-earth and so commonplace as to be most easily recognized across societal and other boundaries” (1). Bok advocated the identification and pursuit of a “minimalist set of common values” (9) that are necessary for human survival and can be shared across cultural and religious differences. A Buddhist economic ethics emphasizing the universal provision of basic goods and services for human betterment would certainly qualify as such a common set of values.

In the subfield of economic ethics known as development ethics, the “capabilities approach” of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum is very popular. There is a limed resonance between the basic goods approach and the capabilities approach in that both question economic growth as the only thing that matters and put humans themselves as important *ends* (rather than means) of economic policies. But there are also significant differences. The focus on specific goods and services is often cast aside in the capabilities approach as “commodity fetishism.” The capabilities approach also pursues a maximalist agenda by overemphasizing ultimate outcomes (capabilities expansion or human flourishing) to the detriment of determinants. While it is certainly the case that ultimate outcomes are fully recognized in Buddhist economic ethics, the traditional sources discussed here show a strong recognition of the core determinants in the form of basic goods provision. This recognition of core determinants is certainly not appropriately described as “commodity fetishism.” For these and other reasons, the basic goods approach is more closely tied to moral minimalism than the capabilities approach.

Basic Goods Reconsidered

The above considerations suggest that human need, as well as the basic goods that address these needs, are indeed recognized across a range of Buddhist traditions, both Theravāda and Mahāyāna. They also suggest that there is a strong connection between the Buddhist recognition of basic needs and basic goods and the tradition of moral minimalism and common ethics in political philosophy. The question remains, however, as to what the implications would be if this recognition were taken seriously and put at the center of Buddhist economic ethics. One first consideration is to move beyond the “four requisites” mentioned above (food, shelter, clothing, and medicine) to a fuller account of a set of basic goods that meet basic needs. Drawing on my recent book, *No Small Hope*, for example, we can tentatively think in terms of “eight requisites.” These are nutritious food, clean water, sanitation, health services, education services, housing, electricity, and human security services. Each is presented in the accompanying table with brief explanations and order-of-magnitude deprivations. This is not necessarily a complete list, and there is purposefully room for expansion and flexibility. For example, others working in this area have emphasized clothing, transportation, and communication.

The Eight Requisites

Requisite	Description	Approx. Number Deprived
Nutritious Food	Nutritious food meets caloric, vitamin, and micro-nutrient requirements.	800 million
Clean Water	Clean water is necessary for drinking, sanitation, hygiene, food production, and food preparation.	700 million
Sanitation	Sanitation is critical to prevent a multitude of diseases and central to human dignity.	2.4 billion

Requisite	Description	Approx. Number Deprived
Health Services	Primary health care is essential for survival and for minimal health.	Nearly 6 million annual child deaths from preventable causes
Education Services	Primary and secondary education are prerequisites for participation in society, one's own health, and the health of one's children.	750 million illiterate adults
Housing	A minimum level of housing quality is required to protect individuals from the elements and to provide space for food preparation and hygiene.	Unknown, but probably over 1 billion
Electricity	Electricity is required for refrigeration of food and medicines, for information from radio, and for air conditioning in hot climates.	1 billion
Human Security Services	Basic security services are required to maintain bodily integrity and prevention of injury.	500,000 deaths annually from violence

Adapted from Reinert (*No Small Hope*)

One thing to note about the eight requisites of the table is that deprivations related to them are relatively vast. A rough sense of the deprivations involved is given in the third column of the table. And in each case, much time and consideration are necessary to determine the productive ways forward to understand the causes of deprivation and to find productive provision strategies. We can do this keeping in mind the statement of Brown that “Buddhist economics strives for a holistic outcome and evaluates a policy by how much it minimizes suffering. By reducing the suffering of people living impoverished and bleak lives, we improve the well-being of everyone” (4). If we take this seriously, the question is

how to apply wisdom and skillful means to address them. Let us briefly consider each in turn.

Nutritious food

Food is one of the original four requisites. We emphasize *nutritious* food because less-than-nutritious food is often the norm. This difference is recognized throughout Buddhist commentary on modern life, including in Thich Nhat Hanh's *The World We Have*. The Buddhist emphasis on vegetarianism is also wise. Fully one third of global grain production goes into livestock production, grain that could more productively (and healthily) be consumed directly. Food production also demands seventy percent of freshwater supplies, and the caloric and water intensity of meat production exceeds that of vegetable-based production by a factor of ten. Avoiding the "meat revolution" is therefore an important part of ensuring adequate food supplies.

Beyond Buddhist-inspired consumption habits, tailoring science-based, agroecology strategies to local environments around the world is where much attention needs to be placed (e.g., De Schutter). Because climate change and population growth challenges will be most concentrated on the African continent, agroecology efforts in this region are most important to increase yields in a sustainable manner. But efforts need to be made to address emerging *food security* issues wherever they arise (Reinert "Food Security").

Clean Water

Water is perhaps the most basic of basic goods (Reinert, "Water"). Without it, human beings cannot survive for much longer than a week. Water is needed not just for direct consumption, however. It is also needed for

hygiene and food preparation. Approximately 700 million individuals lack access to clean and safe water. This lack of access can cause a number of potentially-severe health complications. Unfortunately, we are currently witnessing the emergence of water crises in a number of countries, some driven by climate change (Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change). This has given rise to considerations of what has been called *water security*, that is, the ability (or inability) to meet basic needs in the form of minimal amounts of clean water. All evidence suggests that this is a problem of growing importance where science and ethics need to come together to address nearly-intractable problems. Buddhist economic ethics could have an important role to play here.

Sanitation

Over two billion individuals do not have access to clean and safe sanitation services, and one billion of these individuals practice open defecation. Lack of sanitation has been linked to a vast array of health complications (e.g., Roma and Pugh). Consequently, this deprivation is (almost literally at times) crippling from a health perspective, having been causally and statistically linked to stunted growth. Despite its importance, however, sanitation is not one of the original four requisites and is often simply forgotten by policy-makers. It is the great unmentionable. It is notable, however, that Mahatma Gandhi, who gave his life for Indian independence, once said that “sanitation is more important than independence.” He might have been right, but almost half of India’s population still practices open defecation. For the sake of human health and dignity, the requisite of sanitation services needs to move to the top of provision agendas.

Health services

As we have seen, there is a tradition in Buddhist ethics of emphasizing the provision of medicines and, in the case of Nāgārjuna's *Counsels*, the provision of healthcare itself. It also makes an appearance in the *Upāsaka Precepts Sūtra* in the form of caring for the sick. Truth be told, however, contemporary Buddhist ethics does not seem to place sufficient emphasis on this important subject. As Jonathan Wolff explains, healthcare can be considered an important human right, but healthcare barely receives a mention in Peter Harvey's *Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*. A notable exception here is Brown who argued that "Providing universal health care reduces suffering, and all people should have access to safe, basic surgical care" (41). The application of compassion via skillful means would find a fertile ground in the requisite of health services.

Deprivations in health services are certainly vast. This results in nearly six million infants and children perishing each year from largely-preventable causes. If we look at the policy recommendations made by international organizations to address this serious problem, they include what amounts to the provision of specific basic goods and services (e.g., United Nations Children's Fund). This includes the general requisites of clean water and sanitation services but also a set of more specific requisites such as vitamin supplements, oral rehydration therapies, soap for handwashing, and bed-nets to prevent malarial infection. The application of Buddhist economic ethics to infant and child mortality remains fundamental but begs for more attention.

Education services

While education is not one of the original four requisites, it is certainly mentioned in works on Buddhist economic ethics. We saw above that education was part of Nāgārjuna's *Royal Counsels*. In contemporary times, P.

A. Payutto has suggested that “the state, or social leaders, ought to provide opportunities to the general public for education” (63). Buddhism also makes an appearance in educational theory, as a storehouse of traditions that facilitate educational processes (e.g., Chansomsak and Vale). Considerations of development (both economic and human) suggest that pre-primary, primary, and secondary education levels are the main priorities in that order. Higher education probably does not count as a *basic* good and therefore is not one of the eight requisites. Evidence for the deprivation in primary and secondary education exists in the presence of 750 million illiterate adults. Given its association with millennia-old traditions in education, Buddhist economic ethics is well placed to lend a hand here.

Housing

Housing is an original requisite in the form of “shelter,” and it makes appearances as shelter for travelers in Asoka’s Edicts, Nāgārjuna’s *Royal Counsels*, and the *Upāsaka Precepts Sūtra*. Housing provides protection against the elements and a space for food preparation, hygiene, and taking care of the sick. It is also essential for effective participation in human society by supporting family and community development. Extreme forms of housing deprivation (e.g., homelessness) are associated with many negative health implications, so housing is critical for health. Homelessness can also cut individuals off from water, sanitation services, and education services (e.g., Walters and Gaillard). Short of homelessness, poor housing quality also has adverse health impacts, even in high-income countries. These include asthma, other respiratory illnesses, and lead poisoning. While we do not know with any certainty the quantitative extent of housing deprivation, the often-mentioned figure of one billion could be a low estimate. The companion figure of 100 million homeless also could be low given the global presence of nearly seventy million refugees.

One can find some examples of Buddhist communities becoming involved in housing, such as the Greystone Family Inn run by Zen Community of New York. But it would seem that there is much room for compassionate engagement with this form of deprivation.

Electricity

Electricity is a basic good primarily due to the fact that it makes other important things possible. These ancillary roles of electricity have been well described by Stephen Tully:

Electricity access . . . has become virtually essential to contemporary human survival. Electricity cooks food, powers household appliances, supports a healthy temperature (heating or air conditioning), provides clean water (by powering pumps or desalination treatment), and enables proper health care (refrigerated vaccines, operating theaters, life support systems . . . emergency treatment, or intensive care). Electricity enables agricultural production, processing, and marketing (thereby ensuring food security), provides educational aides (computers, printers and photocopiers), encourages social cohesion (participation in cultural production, entertainment, or recreation) and generates income earning opportunities. (34)

From a Buddhist economic ethics perspective, electricity's role in food, water, health, and education are particularly notable. Without the electricity requisite being provided, deprivations in these other requisites will endure. It is for this reason that the human flourishing prospects for the one billion electricity-deprived persons are limited. Given the concern in Buddhist ethics for ecological issues (e.g., Ives), and the new economic realities of renewable energy resources, it would seem that pursuing

distributed, renewable energy alternatives would be an appropriate response.

Human security services

Human security is violated on a large scale. As mentioned in the table, half a million people die each year as a result of armed violence. However, this statistic is simply a good proxy for a larger set of violent acts, including those wounded or otherwise assaulted (Muggah and Krause). More broadly still, most estimates of the population of fragile and conflicted-affected states put the number of affected individuals at significantly over one billion (e.g., Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development). Human insecurity is therefore a critical issue.

One of the core tenants of compassion (*karuṇā*) is non-harming (*ahiṃsā*). This is clearly an individual responsibility as stated in the *Dhammapada* (1995):

If one, pursuing happiness, strikes
 Living beings who also strive to live happily
 With a rod or other instrument,
 He will reap an unwholesome harvest.
 If one pursues his own happiness
 While causing no harm to other living beings
 Who also strive to live happily,
 He will reap a wholesome harvest.

But along with being an individual responsibility, non-harming is also a social responsibility, and therefore a matter of public policy. We are used to the notion of “security” being one of national security, but the notion of human security shifts this focus to both freedom from fear and freedom from want. The issue of freedom from want is addressed in the first seven requisites, while freedom from fear is addressed in this last

requisite. As it is usually conceived, human security, like the basic goods approach, emphasizes need. Indeed, in the words of Mary Kaldor, Mary Martin, and Sabine Selchow, the human security concept “has to do with human need at moments of extreme vulnerability” (278), and it is indeed in these moments where Buddhist ethics are the most important. To an important degree, this relates to the role of human rights in Buddhist ethics and a concern with human flourishing (Keown). The imposition of fear cuts the possibility of human flourishing at the root. As noted by Damien Keown, “In the absence of human rights the scope for human development and fulfillment through social interaction is drastically reduced” (23). Also reduced are possibilities for participation in community life and political processes. Indeed, Keown essentially invokes the moral minimalism discussed above when he noted that freedom from fear is a “minimum condition” for human flourishing.

Meeting human security needs, or providing freedom from fear, requires a focus on effective community-based policing, the development of equitable judicial systems, and humane correctional systems. Where violence has become entrenched, there is a need to draw on international humanitarian aid, diplomacy, and perhaps outside peacekeeping forces (usually under the auspices of the United Nations). Given the fact that a half million individuals perish annually as a result of violence, the continued and thorough exploration of how these security services can be provided in accordance with Buddhist ethical principles is a pressing need.

The Buddhist Economics of Basic Goods

Attempts to address the ordinary suffering caused by basic goods deprivation face a number of difficult trends. These include increased population (estimated to increase to at least ten billion by the end of the century), increased conflict in some regions, increased numbers of refugees

(now nearly seventy million), and climate change make progress difficult in particular countries and regions. All evidence suggests the continued presence of *duḥkha-duḥkha* in human lives.

There is a standard economic argument that the provision of basic goods and services in the form of the eight requisites will be “anti-growth.” This argument is incomplete in two ways. First, by itself, growth is a questionable economic goal. The measurement of growth is much less precise than generally assumed, and the real value of growth is its ability to translate into broadly-shared patterns of provision, most importantly of the eight requisites themselves. The ultimate aim here is not growth per se but rather human flourishing.

Second, growth processes can actually be supported by the provision of basic goods and services. This has been recognized by economists, particularly in the case of education services. But it has also been recognized in Buddhist thinking. For example, P. A. Payutto recognized the link between human security services and economic activity as follows:

Ethics (or the lack of them) affect economics both directly and indirectly. If, for example, a particular area is unsafe, if there are robbers, and a lot of violence, and if lines of communication are unsafe, then it is obvious that businesses will not invest there, tourists will not want to go there, and so on. The economy of the area is thus adversely affected.
(6)

More generally, Brown argued that “Increasing consumption of basic goods adds to economic performance, but more consumption of status goods does not” (108).

The point here is that a Buddhist economic ethics that stresses the provision of basic goods and services is on firm ground within economics itself. The consideration of provision issues will touch upon a number of

policy issues, including Brown's call for "progressive taxes on the top earners' income and wealth, as well as on luxury purchases, ... to provide transfers to low-income families" (136-137). Buddhist economic ethics has no reason to apologize for the considerations it insists should be at the foreground of economic considerations and policy-making. The wisdom of need is good economics as well as good ethics.

Conclusion

There is long-standing recognition of human need in Buddhist economic ethics that reaches back to its origins. It is characteristic of both the Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions and is present in commentaries up to this day. This recognition of human need is important because it is absent from other traditions, including that of modern economics. The call to address human needs exists in Buddhist economic ethics both as an individual responsibility to others and as a matter of social and economic policy. Indeed, the *wisdom of need* is one defining characteristic of Buddhist economic ethics.

The main point of this article is that the wisdom of need impels us to consider the provision of basic goods and services that meet these needs. To some extent, such provision has also been explicitly recognized in Buddhist economic ethics, especially in the cases of the four requisites of food, clothing, shelter, and medicine. The paper has suggested that basic goods provision be updated within Buddhist ethical systems to be more inclusive and "modern." One such approach is the eight requisites of nutritious food, clean water, sanitation, health services, education services, housing, electricity, and human security services.

The *Upāsaka Precepts Sūtra* defines skillful means in terms of knowing the affairs of the world and seeking to serve (Chappell 363). The

application of the wisdom of need via skillful means requires both knowing the affairs of the world and seeking to serve. It also requires a commitment to address the current and complex physical and economic constraints behind the vast deprivations within the eight requisites. Buddhist economic ethics should not shy away from the relevant scientific and policy arenas. Without these efforts, the long tradition of basic goods considerations within Buddhist economic ethics will not be fully effective in addressing contemporary challenges.

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