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## Abstract

This essay reexamines the Buddhist concept of Right Livelihood (*sammā-ājīva*) through a critical lens, situating it within contemporary global capitalism. Engaging both Buddhist philosophy and Marxian analysis, I argue that conventional interpretations—focused on ethical employment or meaningful work—overlook the systemic conditions of labor exploitation, environmental harm, and socially conditioned craving (*taṇhā*) that define late capitalism. Buddhism identifies suffering (*dukkha*) as rooted in craving, while Marx shows how capitalism institutionalizes endless accumulation, reducing human beings to interchangeable labor power. Both diagnose structural delusion rather than individual moral failure. The essay critiques corporate mindfulness and "conscious capitalism," showing how these practices domesticate Buddhist ethics, enhancing resilience and productivity while leaving harmful systems intact. Similarly, socially engaged Buddhist frameworks risk

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complicity when compassion is framed in service of profit rather than structural change. I propose a radical Buddhist approach to labor centered on refusal, reduction of unnecessary work, and collective reorganization of economic life. Drawing on Buddhist sources, Marxian critique, and contemporary post-work proposals—including universal basic income, degrowth, and commons-based practices—I argue that Right Living today entails reclaiming time for ethical cultivation, community, and political participation. Liberation extends beyond mindfulness to the transformation of labor itself, challenging the structural imperatives that reproduce suffering and craving.

"We need to ask more fundamentally: What is work for?" — Ryan Hediger, *Planet Work: Rethinking Labor and Leisure in the Anthropocene* (3).

## Introduction

In the spring of 2024, my university's Career Development Center—recently renamed the Center for Career Advancement—published a forty-page brochure detailing the post-graduation trajectories of the Class of 2023. *Class of 2023 Graduate Outcomes: Where Our Graduates Go* presents employment data nine months after graduation at Bucknell University, a highly ranked and expensive private liberal arts institution, listed at #31 in the 2024 *US News & World Report* ranking of

National Liberal Arts Colleges,[2] with a published cost of attendance of $88,496. The cover image—depicting a jubilant young woman, in cap and gown, stepping confidently off the graduation stage and into the "real world"—suggests optimism and upward mobility. Yet I approached the document with a measure of unease. As a scholar of religion and political economy, I am attentive to the growing body of evidence suggesting that, despite favorable macroeconomic indicators, many Americans report dissatisfaction and alienation in their working lives.[3] What, then, does this brochure reveal about the professional trajectories of highly educated graduates at elite institutions? What does it suggest about the structure of opportunity in contemporary capitalism? And finally, what in the name of Samantabhadra does any of this have to do with Buddhist ethics?

Very much, I suggest. After all, Buddhist thought contains one of the most sustained critiques of craving (*taṇhā*),[4] attachment, and delusion—categories that resonate strongly with structural features of contemporary capitalism. At the same time, the tradition offers an alternative vision of liberation (*nibbāna*) understood as freedom from entanglement in (mental *and* material) systems that generate harm (*dukkha*). Yet recent appropriations of Buddhist economic and ethical ideas within corporate mindfulness and "conscious capitalism" discourses

[2] Despite the name of this category, Bucknell, like many other schools on this list, is in fact better described as a "small regional university"—both in terms of the students who enroll and the locations in which they end up. A map on page 2 of Graduate Outcomes makes this clear, with 77 percent of 2023 graduates finding employment (or attending graduate school) in the northeastern U.S.

[3] See, e.g., the American Job Quality Survey (2025 State of the Labor Force), Pew Research Center's How Americans View Their Jobs (2023), and Gallup's State of the Global Workplace (2025).

[4] In this essay I use Pāli terms when discussing classical Buddhist doctrines, with exception for the terms that have entered English in their Sanskrit form, such as karma.

risk domesticating this critical potential, reframing a tradition of renunciation as a resource for professional resilience.

## Graduate Outcomes: A Snapshot of the Status Quo

The brochure consists largely of charts and lists organized by Bucknell's three colleges: Arts and Sciences, Engineering, and the Freeman College of Management. Narrative commentary is minimal. After a brief methodological note, the document states that it highlights the "meaningful and purposeful experiences" made possible by a Bucknell education, along with its "value" (1). These terms—"meaningful," "purposeful," and "value"—are left undefined. Their use suggests an individualized conception of fulfillment, in which meaning is presumed to reside primarily in the subjective experience of the graduate rather than in the social consequences of the work undertaken. At least rhetorically, the brochure aligns itself with the broader ideals of liberal arts education: the cultivation of personal growth and socially constructive contribution. What remains less clear is how such ideals are to be evaluated beyond quantitative measures such as the fact of employment and level of salaried compensation.[5]

The invocation of "value" is particularly germane, as this term inevitably carries economic connotations, particularly within the context of a costly private education where return on investment (ROI) is often foregrounded, by parents and institutions alike. As David Graeber observes, economic value frequently comes to displace or redefine notions of intrinsic value, contributing to forms of alienation

[5] Bucknell's Mission Statement reads, in part: "Bucknell educates students for a lifetime of critical thinking and strong leadership characterized by continued intellectual exploration, creativity and imagination" (https://www.bucknell.edu/meet-bucknell/bucknell-leadership/mission-statement). All good things!

characteristic of modern work (*Utopia* 38–39). From a Buddhist ethical perspective, this raises a further question: can work that contributes to *dukkha*—understood as suffering, dissatisfaction, or harm—be considered genuinely meaningful, even if experienced as such by the individual performing it? Or might appeals to personal meaning risk functioning as a form of "spiritual bypassing," in which participation in structurally harmful systems is reframed as individual growth? The prominence of "average salaries," displayed alongside each department's outcomes, further reinforces the economic dimension of value.[6] While compensation is undeniably relevant, its visual and structural centrality risks narrowing the evaluative framework through which postgraduate success is assessed. Questions concerning the social and ethical implications—including the "meaning" and "purpose" of particular jobs receive comparatively little attention. Check that—they receive no attention whatsoever.

## The Narrowness of "Opportunity"

Although ninety-three percent of the Class of 2023 reported employment or further study, the distribution of industries is remarkably concentrated. Twenty-five percent entered financial services, and an additional twenty-four percent moved into professional and business services, including consulting, marketing, law, and real estate.[7] Nearly half

[6] The average starting salary for the Class of 2023 was $72,735, or eighty-two percent of the current sticker price for one year at the institution. This is almost exactly double the average starting salary for all US workers ($35,209), and slightly above the average starting salary for all college graduates with a bachelor's degree, according to NACE data ($68,516). This is by any standard a reasonable average, though of course there is variation both by major and within some majors.

[7] Graduate Outcomes lists thirteen industries, plus "Other." These roughly correspond with the list of industries used by the US Labor Board (Major Industry Codes 01–14). However, the Bucknell list does not include Agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting (Code

of employed graduates thus entered sectors broadly associated with finance and corporate services ("fintech").[8] In total, eighty-four percent were employed in just five interrelated industries, with engineering, healthcare, education, and information technology comprising most of the remainder. Notably absent are sectors such as agriculture, nonprofit work, or the broader service economy, which employs a substantial portion of the contemporary U.S. workforce. The concentration in white-collar financial and corporate sectors reflects a central promise of elite higher education: access to prestigious professions associated with upward mobility. At the same time, this pattern invites scrutiny when read alongside the brochure's emphasis on meaning and purpose. For example, one featured employer, Guidepoint, describes itself as "a research enablement platform designed to advance understanding and empower our client's decision-making process." Whether such roles fulfill the ethical aspirations often associated with liberal education is a question worth examining.

Another page prominently displays a selection of corporate logos, including Amazon, Goldman Sachs, Booz Allen Hamilton, Deloitte, and ExxonMobil. These firms rank among the most influential corporations globally and have been subjects of sustained public debate regarding labor practices, financial conduct, environmental impact, and corporate governance. Their presence in the brochure underscores the extent to which elite graduates are funneled into institutions

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1), Mining (Code 2), Transportation and utilities (Code 6), Leisure and Hospitality (Code 11), Other services (Code 12), or Public Administration (Code 13). It also separates Health Care from Education (Code 10), and Legal Services from Marketing, Real Estate, and Consulting (Code 9: Professional and Business Services).

[8] A recent article in *The Economist* (19 December 2024) reveals that this pipeline to fintech is not just Bucknell; the numbers are if anything higher at Harvard—which among other things refutes the ridiculous notion peddled on the American political right, and often accepted by some mainstream liberals as well, that elite schools are producing woke Marxists! If so, they are woke Marxists who have no troubles cashing hefty paychecks from the high priests of finance capital.

central to contemporary global capitalism. The question then becomes how "meaningful" work is to be evaluated when employment leads graduates into corporations widely criticized for environmental "negative externalities," financial misconduct, or controversial labor practices. Even in the engineering sector—where job titles may appear more directly tied to tangible production—many graduates enter major defense contractors such as Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, Parsons, or Raytheon. These patterns invite ethical reflection—at the very least—rather than simple celebration.[9]

The traditional Buddhist concept of Right Livelihood (*sammā-ājīva*) offers a potential counterpoint. In the early texts, the Buddha prohibits five forms of trade: weapons, living beings, meat, intoxicants, and poisons. These are not instructions for performing harmful work with greater mindfulness or improved intentions; they are categorical refusals. One does not trade in weapons with the right attitude. One does not trade in weapons at all—or "meat" (agribusiness?); or "poisons" (plastic industry?). If this principle is taken seriously, its contemporary implications are difficult to ignore. What would it mean for those employed by firms such as Lockheed Martin? How might it apply to financial institutions such as Goldman Sachs, whose activities during the 2008 crisis had far-reaching social consequences? Or to fossil fuel corporations such as ExxonMobil, whose profitability depends upon continued large-scale carbon extraction? The point is not to single out villains, but to ask whether entire sectors of the modern economy stand in tension with the logic of non-harming itself. The more pressing question, then, may not be "How do we find meaningful work within this

[9] The term "defense industry" is itself a euphemism. These companies manufacture weapons systems designed to kill people. That Bucknell graduates—products of an education supposedly centered on "critical thinking"—uncritically enter these industries speaks to the profound disconnect between liberal arts rhetoric and actual ethical formation. (On these lines, I am in full support of the Trump Administration's move to change the Department of Defense to the Department of War—let's call things what they are).

system?" but rather "How has the discourse of meaningful work come to function as a mechanism through which we internalize and reproduce exploitative structures?" Framed this way, the problem shifts. The Buddhist concept of Right Livelihood—reinscribed as Right Living—does not simply help us identify the right job within capitalism; it raises the more unsettling possibility that many jobs produced by advanced capitalism should not exist at all.

This essay proceeds in three movements. First, I examine how contemporary interpretations of Right Livelihood have been domesticated—reduced to matters of personal attitude rather than questions of structural participation in harm. Second, I reconstruct a more demanding reading that foregrounds refusal, the reduction of unnecessary labor, and the possibility of reorganizing economic life along less harmful lines. Finally, I explore what a genuinely Buddhist—or at least "Buddhish"—response to work in the age of bullshit jobs might entail: not the pursuit of meaningful employment, but the minimization of employment itself, in favor of what Karl Marx called "the realm of freedom," and what Buddhists might recognize as the material preconditions for practice and liberation.

## Categorizing Work in an Age of Bullshit Jobs

Here we arrive at a central tension: many contemporary jobs offer compensation and status yet lack clear social purpose. In *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*, critical anthropologist David Graeber describes such roles as positions that are well paid and symbolically rewarded but widely experienced—even or especially by those who hold them—as socially unnecessary or meaningless. Such jobs, according to Graeber, are disproportionately concentrated in precisely the fields entered by most Bucknell graduates—the so-called "knowledge economy." As noted earlier,

Bucknell graduates are not representative of the broader American workforce, either socioeconomically or occupationally. To widen the lens, I propose a provisional four-part framework for thinking about work today, distinguishing between what I will—employing the technical terms *du jour*—call shitty, bullshit, batshit, and dharmic jobs.

### *1. Shitty Jobs*

*Shitty* jobs are typically low-status, low-paid, and physically demanding or monotonous.[10] They are concentrated in the service and industrial sectors—retail, food service, cleaning, gig labor, factory work—constituting a substantial portion of the U.S. workforce. These roles are often indispensable to the functioning of society, yet they offer limited security, mobility, or recognition. As David Graeber observes, the work that most directly sustains others (*reproductive* labor, including, most obviously, care and domestic work) is frequently the least compensated (*Bullshit* 210–14). The paradox is difficult to miss: the more socially necessary ("valuable") the labor, the less it tends to be remunerated. At the same time, many such jobs remain vulnerable to automation, rendering even their current precarity unstable. A related and possibly distinct subcategory are *dirty* jobs. These are more physically demanding or unpleasant—even dangerous—and may have moderate social status, variable financial reward, and variable social value. Examples include trash collectors, miners, sewer inspectors, and (possibly) police officers. While these latter jobs may take a physical and mental toll, those who do them do not generally think they lack meaning or purpose.

[10] The term was popularized by Mike Rowe, host of the television show "Dirty Jobs," which aired on the Discovery Channel starting in 2003. Many of the stereotypical "blue collar" jobs (gendered as male) fall into this category. Many of these jobs are also at risk of obsolescence due to automation.

## *2. Bullshit Jobs*

*Bullshit* jobs, by contrast, are typically white-collar roles that command higher pay and status while contributing little of discernible social value. Graeber identifies corporate middle management, certain forms of consulting, public relations, and administrative expansion as recurring examples.[11] Such positions often proliferate within complex bureaucratic systems, where their primary function is to sustain organizational processes rather than produce tangible goods or services.[12] What makes them distinctive is not simply their questionable utility, but the fact that many workers themselves privately regard them as unnecessary. Surveys suggest that a significant minority of U.S. employees experience their work as "meaningless"—a condition that predictably generates anxiety, alienation, and quiet cynicism.[13] Here is Graeber's explanation for the emergence of bullshit jobs:

> [Despite the promise of automation to make our lives better,] technology has been marshaled, if anything, to figure out ways to make us all work more. In order to achieve this, jobs have had to be created that are, effectively, pointless. Huge swathes of people, in Europe and North

[11] In his provocative 2018 book, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*, Graeber outlines the various sorts of bullshit jobs, while pointing out that many jobs, while not entirely bullshit, face creeping bullshitization (he uses college professors as an example of this).

[12] "Why does this happen? The answer clearly isn't economic: it's moral and political. The ruling class has figured out that a happy and productive population with free time on their hands is a mortal danger (think of what started to happen when this even began to be approximated in the '60s). And, on the other hand, the feeling that work is a moral value in itself, and that anyone not willing to submit themselves to some kind of intense work discipline for most of their waking hours deserves nothing, is extraordinarily convenient for them" (*Bullshit* xvi-xvii).

[13] This represents only those workers willing to admit meaninglessness to themselves and surveyors. Graeber's research suggests the actual number is far higher, with many workers engaged in elaborate psychological defenses to avoid confronting the pointlessness of their labor. From a Buddhist perspective, this represents another form of *avijjā*—the willful ignorance necessary to survive capitalism's assault on meaning.

> America in particular, spend their entire working lives performing tasks they secretly believe do not really need to be performed. *The moral and spiritual damage that comes from this situation is profound.* It is a scar across our collective soul. Yet virtually no one talks about it.[14]

### *3. Batshit Jobs*

*Batshit* jobs name an even more troubling category, from a classical Buddhist perspective: forms of employment in which individuals participate, directly or indirectly, in the degradation of social and ecological conditions in order to secure a livelihood (Hansen "Batshit Jobs"). Here the focus shifts from subjective meaninglessness to objective harm.[15] This category includes sectors such as fossil fuel extraction, industrial agriculture, aviation, weapons manufacturing, and segments of finance and advertising that facilitate ecologically destructive patterns of production and consumption. Workers in these fields may not perceive themselves as destructive actors; indeed, most do not. Yet structurally, their labor sustains systems that undermine long-term planetary stability. As Bue Rübner Hansen has argued, the psychological tension generated by this contradiction often produces either repression or exaggerated identification with the work itself—another variation on alienation. From a Buddhist perspective, this condition can be understood as a form of *avijjā*—ignorance not as individual stupidity, but

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[14] Graeber (*Bullshit* xvii), my emphasis. Riffing on Marx, Graeber emphasizes the "moral and spiritual"—i.e., cognitive affective, and psychic effects of the contemporary labor regime.

[15] Of course, there can be meaningful and significant differences between one's particular occupation and the company one works for. For instance, a large company like JP Morgan Chase employs cleaners as well as entry-level workers, data analysts, middle management types, and high-flying bankers. In short, one could work at a shit or bullshit job in a batshit company.

as systemic misrecognition embedded within economic life. Contemporary mindfulness culture sometimes proposes that workers respond by becoming more attentive or compassionate within existing roles. Yet such advice risks ethical inversion. There are limits to what intentionality can redeem. One cannot render destructive activity harmless merely by performing it with greater presence. The more traditional Buddhist response would be *paṭinissagga*: relinquishment, renunciation, or refusal.

### *4. Dharmic Jobs*

Finally, there are, at least conceptually, *dharmic* forms of work: labor that (a) provides a sense of meaning, (b) sustains a sufficient measure of material well-being within current economic constraints,[16] and (c) contributes to the flourishing of others in ways consonant with Buddhist ethical commitments. Educators, care and social workers, environmental advocates, and practitioners of restorative justice might serve as provisional examples. Yet this category requires immediate qualification. Under contemporary capitalism, even socially beneficial work is entangled in compromised systems. The social worker often operates within structures that manage rather than abolish poverty. The educator prepares students for participation in corporate hierarchies—including firms such as Goldman Sachs. Environmental activism may depend upon philanthropic funding derived from the very industries it seeks to reform. This does not render such labor meaningless. It

[16] Acknowledging regional variations in cost of living, in 2025 a minimum "living income" for a single person with no dependents would be $50,000 per year (or more than three times the official poverty line of $15,650). Of the top fifteen occupations in the US today, only four pay an average salary above this line, and those just barely. See U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment and Wages—May 2024 (OEWS), Table 1: https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/area_emp_chart/area_emp_chart_data.htm#United_States.

does, however, raise the possibility that fully dharmic livelihood may be structurally constrained within capitalism's totalizing framework. In that case, the most honest forms of dharmic practice may be those that blur the boundary between work and non-work: mutual aid, community care, and gift-based networks that operate partially outside market logics.

It should be emphasized that these categories are not moral judgments about individual workers but reflections on the social organization of labor itself. Policing, for example, might be considered problematic because the profession presumes the legitimate use of force—an assumption that sits uneasily within Buddhist ethical traditions grounded in *ahiṃsā*, or non-harming. The point is not that police officers are personally blameworthy, but that institutions built around the management of violence raise serious moral questions. The problem, in short, lies less with workers themselves than with systems that generate harmful, unnecessary, or ethically compromised forms of labor in the first place. (Setting aside, for the moment, the classical Buddhist emphasis on one's *intention* in wanting to become a police officer or ICE agent.)

## Classical Buddhism and Work

We now arrive at the intersection of this analysis with classical Buddhist thought. As a general principle, Buddhism locates suffering in forms of attachment—attachment to desire, to identity, and to contingent external conditions. Applied to work, this suggests that when employment becomes a primary source of self-definition, status, or security, it is likely to generate dissatisfaction rather than resolve it. A Buddhist critique of labor would therefore begin with a simple question: does this form of work reduce suffering—for oneself and others—or

does it reproduce it, socially and ecologically? The issue is not whether a job feels fulfilling, but whether it contributes to conditions conducive to wisdom and compassion.[17]

Any sustained Buddhist discussion of labor must begin with Right Livelihood (*sammā-ājīva*), the fifth element of the Eightfold Path and, together with Right Speech and Right Action, one of the three components explicitly associated with ethical conduct (*sila*).[18] Classical sources present Right Livelihood not as a matter of personal preference, but as a constraint: one's means of sustenance should avoid harm and align with broader commitments to non-violence and clarity of mind. If a given occupation systematically contributes to exploitation, environmental destruction, or social fragmentation, it is difficult to reconcile with this framework. Prestige and compensation do not alter that tension. From a Buddhist standpoint, material success—while not in itself problematic, as in Christianity (!)—does not neutralize ethical cost.

At the same time, the Buddhist relationship to labor is more complex than contemporary appeals to Right Livelihood sometimes suggest. The paradigmatic practitioner in early Buddhism—the stream-enterer (*sotāpanna*), who might be either monastic or lay. Lay stream-enterers continue to participate in family, economic, and civic life, albeit guided by ethical and spiritual commitments aligned with the Dharma. Renunciation is not a prerequisite for initial awakening; the Buddha recognized that genuine spiritual progress can occur within worldly roles. Likewise, the Vinaya—the monastic code—serves

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[17] My students tend to think that Asian traditions such as Buddhism and Daoism are simply about "doing what one feels" or "following one's own truth." Nope!

[18] Pāli *sammā ājīva*; Sk. *samyag ājīva* (use, subsist, enjoy); Ch. 正命 *zhengming* (semantic field includes: name, mandate, order, destiny); Jp. 正命 *shōmyō* (semantic field includes: life, most important aspect of a thing, and even revolution).

multiple functions beyond mere etiquette. Its rules about purity, conduct, and ritual observances sustain communal cohesion, minimize harm, and create conditions conducive to ethical cultivation and meditative practice. Yet the Vinaya is not a neutral or universally egalitarian text: it embeds patriarchal, hierarchical, and gendered norms that reflect the social world of early Indian monasticism. Even as it structures ethical practice, like any worldly set of rules written by men, reproduces limitations and exclusions, reminding us that institutional frameworks—like economic or corporate systems today—can support cultivation while simultaneously reflecting structural injustices.

## The Monastic Ideal: A Structural Tension

A central theme of classical Buddhism—particularly in its textual articulation—is simplicity of lifestyle, closely linked to contentment (*santuṭṭhi*, *appicchatā*). The *Dhammapada* is often cited as a locus classicus,[19] though this teaching resonates broadly with the soteriological aim of liberation from suffering through renunciation of craving (*taṇhā*; *tṛṣṇā*). The very terms for monk and nun—*bhikkhu* and *bhikkhunī*—mark a commitment to withdraw from ordinary domestic, social, economic, and political obligations, encompassing both the productive and reproductive dimensions of conventional society. The monastic ideal prescribes a modest, largely self-sufficient lifestyle, enabling practitioners to devote most of their time to study, meditation, and other spiritual pursuits, typically supported by lay donations. This arrangement creates a structural tension: the *saṅgha*, by withdrawing from economic and political systems, challenges their centrality, yet simultaneously depends on those same systems for survival. As Peter

[19] "Health is the foremost possession, Contentment, the foremost wealth" (*Dhp*. 15; 204); "The mendicant who envies others doesn't become concentrated" (*Dhp*. 25; 365).

Harvey notes, "monastic simplicity attracts lay donations" (204).[20] The more monks and nuns remove themselves from worldly production, the more they leverage the surplus wealth generated by lay supporters seeking merit—a subtle entanglement of renunciation and economic dependence.[21] Here lies a paradox at the heart of Buddhist economics: *the tradition manifests its principles most fully when practitioners minimize work altogether*, even while the *sangha* is dependent for its continued existence on the "work" of lay followers. If we were to set aside that (inter-)dependence, however—i.e., if we could find ways to "fix" that need and realize self-sufficiency—then the message is clear: the Buddhist economic ideal involves reducing livelihood to essentials, freeing time for practice and study—and perhaps even play. If we extend this principle beyond the *sangha*, it suggests a provocative possibility: perhaps Right Livelihood does not mean finding the "right job," but reducing the necessity of jobs themselves, collectively reimagining economic life in ways that prioritize care, sufficiency, and liberation over productivity and profit.

[20] Steven Collins argues on this basis for a fundamental distinction between Christian and Buddhist monastic traditions vis-à-vis social theory and utopia (185–226). In some countries, such as Sri Lanka, China and Japan, monasteries and monastic institutions became through this process wealthy landowners and, partly as a result, economic and political playmakers. Despite the occasional critic (more often, at least in the case of Japan) from outside the saṅgha or from rival institutions, there was generally little resistance to the notion of monastic wealth and power in and of itself.

[21] Citing the anthropological work of Stanley J. Tambiah and Jane Bunnag, Peter Harvey suggests that the potential problem of corruption is resolved in practice by an equitable distribution of the wealth donated to certain esteemed monks throughout the monastic community, but this does not resolve the more fundamental structural tension alluded to above (204–205).

## The Poverty of Lay Buddhist Economics

For lay Buddhists, economic activity was expected to follow certain guidelines, supposedly set forth by the Buddha himself.[22] Stripped of their cosmological and soteriological context, these instructions can seem Calvinist in sensibility. Wealth, for example, should be earned without violence; resources should be shared rather than hoarded; greed is to be avoided. In short, do the right thing, don't be a jerk, and keep your hands clean. Here is "secular Buddhist" Stephen Batchelor's take:

> In short, in his or her work, a Buddhist should be energetic, industrious, diligent, skillful, proficient, and prudent. People should protect their earnings, keep good company, and live within their means. Wealth, he taught, provided that it is lawfully obtained, brings four kinds of happiness: economic security; having enough to spend generously on oneself and others; the peace of mind that accompanies freedom from debt; and the leading of a blameless life. (65)

This seems harmless enough. And yet, such blandishments reveal little about economic ethics in a complex, modern world. They assume a simple, local economy and focus almost entirely on individual decision-making and karma, rather than on social or systemic structures. The emphasis is on how wealth is acquired and used, not on whether the system that produces it is just. In short, it's a manual for moral micro-management, not structural critique.[23]

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[22] See, e.g., *Aṅguttara Nikāya* III.45, IV.281; *Dīgha Nikāya* III.188

[23] See Sizemore and Swearer, 2, 13, P. Harvey 202; Fenn 107 for a critique of this view based on early texts such as the *Cakkavatti-sīhanāda Sutta*.

These prescriptions illustrate what I call the individualization of structural harm—a pattern that resurfaces throughout Buddhist engagement with economics and has been eagerly co-opted by corporate mindfulness programs. The assumption is always the same: the problem is your attitude toward wealth, never the structure of the economy itself. But what does it mean to "lawfully obtain" wealth in a system where the laws enshrine exploitation? To live "within one's means" when those means are artificially constrained? Or to work energetically, diligently, skillfully when your labor produces *dukkha* for others?[24] The classical framework assumes the economy is given and asks how individuals should navigate it. A radical Buddhist economics flips this: liberation is given, and we ask what economic arrangements make liberation possible. The answer is not more ethical work—it is less work altogether.

As I have argued elsewhere, we need to look beyond these prescriptive rules to find Buddhist resources for contemporary economic ethics.[25] This means extrapolating from general teachings, beginning with Right Livelihood—or, as I prefer to call it, Right Living—to imagine

[24] The Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism, led by Buddhist socialist Seno'o Girō, recognized this problem in 1930s Japan: "Praying to Śākyamuni Buddha will not make your rice bins overflow. The Buddha himself taught that one must work diligently to earn a living. But in our times—when a broken economic system ensures that labor does not bring fair reward—the first step is to reform the system itself, so it serves the welfare of all. We cannot hide behind empty slogans like 'poverty cannot keep up with industry'. As the Buddha showed, when illness strikes, one must seek the proper cure and understand its root causes. Likewise, to protect our lives and our communities, devotion alone is not enough; action and insight are indispensable" (Seno'o, "Shinkō bukkyō," 274). It is worth noting that Seno'o's Youth League predates the term "Socially Engaged Buddhism" by nearly four decades.

[25] Shields, "Buddhist Economics."

an economy oriented less toward profit and more toward human and ecological flourishing.[26]

## Schumacher's Buddhist Economics

The first serious attempt by a Western scholar to fuse Buddhism and economics came from E. F. Schumacher in his classic essay "Buddhist Economics," first published in 1966 and later reprinted in his bestselling 1973 book *Small is Beautiful* (snarkily subtitled *Economics as if People Mattered*). In another chapter, "The Role of Economics," Schumacher invokes John Stuart Mill's expansive conception of economics—or political economy—as "a branch of social philosophy, so interlinked with all the other branches that its conclusions…are only true conditionally, subject to interference and counteraction from causes not directly within its scope" (38). This broader lens opens the door to Buddhist economics: as any substantial religious tradition, Buddhism offers ideas, values, and habits expected to shape behavior across all facets of life.[27]

For Schumacher, Buddhist economics rests on the Eightfold Path's injunction of Right Livelihood, which necessarily involves social relations, labor, production, and exchange. From this foundation, Schumacher develops a broad-stroked but insightful theory of labor, arguing that work can be a liberating process if it:

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[26] "The central defining feature of economics is, in fact, the identification and understanding of the inevitable patterns of behavior in society that are related to 'livelihood'" (Daniels 246).

[27] It is important to note that Schumacher is not making claims to a form of economics that is somehow necessary or essential to Buddhism, but rather that the logic—or perhaps, to borrow Steven Collins's term—imaginaire—of classical Buddhism may provide a better foundation for economic theory and practice in the contemporary period (better here understood in relation to human flourishing, broadly conceived).

1. Utilizes and develops all human faculties, both physical and mental.

2. Promotes bonding with others in a shared project, softening egoism.

3. Produces 'useful' goods—those that provide value to individuals or society.[28]

A crucial point in Schumacher's argument is that, under our current socioeconomic system, "work" is artificially separated from "leisure." Labor becomes a necessary evil: we toil to survive and to earn the privilege of enjoying our "free time" (if we're lucky enough to have any). In a Buddhist view, however, work and leisure are complementary: "To strive for leisure as an alternative to work would be considered a complete misunderstanding of . . . human existence . . . work and leisure are complementary parts of the same process and cannot be separated without destroying the joy of work and the bliss of leisure" (52).[29] Here, however, Schumacher's vision falters. He imagines a Buddhist economics that humanizes labor within capitalism, making work fulfilling and joyful—but he sidesteps capitalism's structural logic: the imperative to accumulate, extract surplus value, and reduce all relationships to market transactions. Can labor that "utilizes and develops all human faculties" survive the demand for maximum productivity? Can workers "bond with others in a common project" while competing

[28] These three overlapping requirements for labor are very much in line with Marx's critique of alienation under the capitalist system of wage-labor, though the second and third points hearken to certain streams of classical anarchism as well as the "utopian" socialism of William Morris.

[29] It bears noting that Schumacher's ideal Buddhist society is one that is—like most actual Buddhist societies—irredeemably sexist; e.g., while "full employment" is a goal, that would only be for men, since "[w]omen, on the whole, do not need an 'outside' job . . . In particular, to let mothers of young children run wild would be as uneconomic in the eyes of a Buddhist economist as the employment of a skilled worker as a soldier in the eyes of a modern economist" (53–54).

for scarce positions? Can we produce genuinely useful goods in a system built on planned obsolescence and artificially generated demand?

The answer, I argue, is no—at least not systematically. Schumacher, like many Buddhist economic reformers, treats capitalism as a neutral container to be filled with Buddhist values. But capitalism is never neutral: it shapes human beings and relationships according to its own imperatives. A truly Buddhist economics cannot simply moralize labor within capitalism; it must ask whether capitalism allows Right Living at all. Given the nature of much contemporary work, this implies one of two paths: radically transform labor (and the economic system) or cultivate the capacity to endure tasks that have no obvious "value" beyond their contribution to the system. Most modern Buddhists confronted with this dilemma choose the latter, which has some canonical precedent. Still, I want to explore the former as plausibly Buddhist: a radical restructuring of labor and economic life that honors the spirit of Right Living, rather than merely tolerating the status quo.[30]

## *Dukkha*, Alienation, and the Labor Theory of Value

Here it may be useful to summarize Marx's labor theory of value, as laid out in the first three chapters of *Capital*. Schumacher clearly draws on Marx's core insight—a key to understanding modern capitalism even

[30] As I have argued elsewhere, "for all his genuine insights into the nature of the problem, Schumacher's critique fails to question the fundamental framework of the capitalist economic system itself, instead relying on some form of Buddhist moral/spiritual wisdom as a balm to the dehumanizing tendencies of that system. It scratches the surface of the problem but does not dig far enough down to its roots—to the radical, which is the human" ("Buddhist Economics," 418). Similarly, both Thai monk-scholar P. A. Payutto, author of the 1992 work *Buddhist Economics: A Middle Way for the Market Place*, and Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, who espoused a form of Dhammic socialism, focus their critique on the "worldly" character of both capitalist and communist systems, upholding an idealized Buddhist tradition as the moral exemplar (418–419).

for non-Marxists—but he largely sidesteps the radical implications of Marx's thinking on labor, commodification, alienation, and the erosion of community. Marx distinguishes between *use-value*—what a thing actually does for us—and *exchange-value*—what it can be sold for.[31] When societies focus on exchange-value, practical usefulness matters less than market price. This encourages *commodity fetishism*: we treat goods, labor, and relationships as if their value is inherent, rather than arising from human effort and social connection. From a Buddhist perspective, this mirrors craving (*taṇhā*): we attach importance to what is fleeting and constructed, obscuring the harm produced by our economic activity.[32] Once money and credit enter the equation—a necessary step from barter to capitalism—anything can, in theory, be exchanged for anything else. Everything, including labor itself, becomes a commodity. Marx emphasizes that human value resides in labor power, yet in a system dominated by money, this real value is obscured: money replaces the thing as the primary medium of exchange, and with it, the lived, *human* dimension of work is flattened into abstract numbers.

Before the rise of the money system, social and economic relations were different: one's labor, needs, and desires were more visible and had to be negotiated directly for successful exchange. Under capitalism, by contrast, human relations are quantified, while objects are imbued with value in themselves. As Kate Evans puts it, summarizing Marx: "We have material relations between persons and social relations between things" (19). Mute objects become not just objects of desire but objects of value, while human beings—especially the producing classes—are reduced to their occupations. Community, in effect,

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[31] While everything has both types of value, there is a mutual incompatibility between these as "intrinsic properties": one cannot have both (i.e., one can either use a "thing" or exchange it, but not "have one's cake and trade it too!").

[32] See my article "Liberation as Revolutionary Praxis" for a discussion of the various forms of "materialism."

dissolves: each person's share of social labor is dictated by the market, and the social fabric "melts into air."[33] (Marx, it should be noted, did not see this as entirely negative, recognizing capitalism's capacity for positive disruption.) For present purposes, the key harm lies not only in material inequality but in the degradation of social relations and, arguably, human nature itself.

## Marx to Buddha to Marx

This Marxian critique resonates strikingly with Buddhist concepts of *dukkha* (suffering) and *anicca* (impermanence). Just as commodification reduces social relations to market transactions, the delusion of a separate self turns genuine connection into a transaction. Similarly, Buddhism identifies *taṇhā* (craving) as the root of suffering, while Marx identifies endless capital accumulation—essentially institutionalized craving—as the engine of exploitation. Both traditions agree: the problem is not individual moral failure but systemic delusion, a structural distortion shaping how we inhabit the world. Marx's insight that capitalism turns humans into commodities finds a dark mirror in the Buddhist doctrine of *anattā* (non-self)—but inverted. Buddhism teaches that there is no permanent, essential self; capitalism enacts this truth in the worst possible way, reducing people to interchangeable units of labor power. Where Buddhism offers liberation through non-attachment, capitalism delivers exploitation through disposability. A

[33] "[T]he chain that formerly connected all these special labors into the common labor, into the societal economy, is broken. Each person is now on his own: the farmer, the shoemaker, the baker, the locksmith . . . . Each is completely free and independent. The community no longer has anything to say to him, no one can order him to work for the whole, nor does anyone bother about his needs. The community that was previously a whole has been broken up into individual little particles or atoms, like a mirror shattered into a thousand splinters; each person now floats like a piece of dust in the air, as it were, and wonders how he will manage" (Luxemburg 225).

genuinely Buddhist economics would embrace non-self while rejecting its capitalist perversion, recognizing interdependence not as a vulnerability to exploit, but as the foundation for collective flourishing beyond the tyranny of work.

In short, Marx offers a penetrating critique of neoclassical economics as a system that is not only materially disastrous for the many, but, arguably more importantly, destructive of human possibility and communal identity. While Schumacher's Buddhist economics touches on some of these concerns, Marx goes further in emphasizing the systemic and social dimensions of labor. In Marx's framework, productive activity does more than shape nature; it shapes human nature itself.[34] Labor is thus doubly fraught: it can inflict profound harm under capitalism, but it also carries the potential for liberation—a radically transformed way of being in the world, in relation to others and to the natural environment.[35] Where Buddhism traditionally addressed these dynamics through individual renunciation, Marx turned toward collective transformation. This, I suggest, is where a radical Buddhist economics must go beyond both classical Buddhism and Schumacher: not toward individual ethical consumption or compassionate management, but toward the collective reorganization of economic life, minimizing unnecessary labor while maximizing the conditions for genuine liberation.

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[34] See, e.g., *Capital* I: 283: "[Humanity] acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he [sic] simultaneously changes his own nature." Also, from *The Poverty of Philosophy*: "history is nothing but a continuous transformation of human nature" (MECW 6: 192).

[35] See Geras 89–90 for a penetrating analysis of this idea in relation to materialism, idealism and human nature.

## Right Living as Living Labor

The classical interpretation of Right Livelihood faces three major limitations. First, the kinds of work common in early Buddhist societies were very different from the specialized, corporate, or service-oriented labor many people—especially Bucknell graduates—perform today. Second, the canonical texts are primarily concerned with establishing rules for monks and nuns, leaving little guidance for lay workers beyond the list of prohibitions against certain trades (weapons, poison). Thus, detailed discussions of Right Livelihood in the Pali texts revolve around monastic etiquette: avoiding folk superstitions or behaviors deemed impure, such as, and I quote: "laying demons in a cemetery" (*Dīgha Nikāya* II). While these prescriptions can be entertaining when read today, they offer little for a contemporary Buddhist critique of labor. More generally, Right Livelihood emphasizes prohibition: it tells us what *not* to do rather than articulating a positive vision of ethical, liberative engagement with work. Contemporary Buddhist economic thought—from Schumacher onward—has largely filled this void with liberal reformism: find meaningful work, be a conscious consumer, practice mindfulness at the office. Even the idea of "dharmic jobs," introduced earlier as a theoretical category, proves compromised or impossible under capitalism's totalizing logic.

What, then, might a genuinely radical Buddhist critique of labor look like? I suggest it begins not with "What is the right kind of work?" but with the deeper question: "Why is work necessary at all?"[36] Marx gestures toward this insight in his distinction between the "realm of necessity" and the "realm of freedom"—recognizing that genuine

[36] "Why do we work so long and so hard? The mystery here is not that we are required to work or that we are expected to devote so much time and energy to its pursuit, but rather that there is not more active resistance to this state of affairs. The problems with work today [in the US] have to do with both its quantity and its quality and are not limited to the travails of any one group" (Weeks 1).

human flourishing requires not better jobs, but less work; not meaningful employment, but liberation from the tyranny of employment itself (D. Harvey 296). From a Buddhist perspective, we can frame this similarly: if *dukkha* arises from *taṇhā* (craving), and capitalism institutionalizes craving as its organizing principle, then Right Living under capitalism is largely a contradiction in terms. The appropriate response is not to find the least harmful way to participate, but to minimize participation altogether—to cultivate economic arrangements that reduce unnecessary labor, free time for genuine practice and community, and allow us to live simply so that we may simply live. This approach points toward a Buddhist case for degrowth, work reduction, and the outright refusal of bullshit and batshit jobs. Rather than asking how Buddhist principles can make us better workers, we should ask how they might liberate us from the very necessity of so much work in the first place.

## How Right Livelihood Became a Tool of Exploitation

With the above caveats noted, classical Buddhism does offer some clear guidance on what constitutes ethical work: Right Livelihood is inseparable from a broader ethical framework aimed at reducing suffering. As noted, certain trades—dealing in weapons, intoxicants, or harm to living beings—were categorically prohibited, not as suggestions for performing harmful work "mindfully," but as absolute refusals grounded in non-harming (*ahiṃsā*). Yet today, concepts like Right Livelihood and mindfulness are embraced by the very corporations whose business models rely on exploitation, environmental destruction, and bullshit jobs. The mechanism is what we might call the corporate capture of mindfulness: the domestication of Buddhist practice into a technology for worker optimization. Google's *Search Inside Yourself* program promises emotional intelligence and productivity gains; apps like

Headspace and Calm are explicitly marketed to reduce stress and enhance performance in the workplace; even Davos pairs meditation sessions with panels on maximizing shareholder value.[37] At first glance, this seems like progress, but what results is, arguably, a stripped-down, ethically neutered set of techniques deployed to maintain compliance within harmful systems.

Corporate mindfulness inverts the ethical logic of Buddhism. Rather than questioning the legitimacy of work that causes harm, it teaches individuals to cope with cognitive dissonance. Consider a few examples: weapons designers taught to remain "present" while developing missiles[38]; Goldman Sachs traders meditating to handle the stress of wealth extraction[39]; Amazon warehouse workers briefed in "AmaZen" booths while enduring grueling conditions[40]; oil executives managing climate anxiety while continuing fossil-fuel extraction.[41] In each case, mindfulness functions as spiritual Novocain—numbing awareness of harm while leaving the structural causes untouched, and leaving batshit jobs the run of the field. This is a particularly insidious form of what psychologists call "spiritual bypassing," wherein suffering

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[37] Headspace's corporate webpage explicitly markets meditation as a tool for "performance," "resilience," and "retention," with case studies showing reduced healthcare costs and improved productivity metrics.

[38] Purser documents several such cases in Chapter 12 of *McMindfulness*, including mindfulness training at defense contractors and military installations.

[39] Goldman Sachs has featured prominently in various articles about Wall Street's embrace of meditation and mindfulness practices, often framed uncritically as evidence of changing corporate culture. See Purser, *McMindfulness*, 12–13.

[40] The "AmaZen" booths were widely mocked when introduced in 2021, with critics noting the dystopian absurdity of offering meditation chambers instead of addressing the brutal working conditions that make them necessary (Raymond, "Corporations are Trying"). And yet, I wonder if this can be so easily dismissed as simply an "American" or neoliberal appropriation. Might it not rather be a logical if "extreme" extension of a tendency one sees even in classical Buddhism.

[41] Several major oil and gas companies have introduced mindfulness programs, often framed as part of employee wellness initiatives, with no apparent recognition of the cognitive dissonance involved.

is privatized and reframed as an individual failure rather than a systemic problem. Stress, burnout, or moral dissonance is blamed on insufficient mindfulness or attachment, not on exploitative labor conditions. Corporate mindfulness thus becomes a technology of governance: it makes workers more resilient and productive without reducing the structural generation of suffering.

From a Buddhist perspective, mindfulness (*sati*) is not ethically neutral. It is "right" only when oriented toward liberation: reducing suffering, cultivating compassion, and understanding the conditions that generate *dukkha*. When deployed to optimize participation in harmful systems, it becomes wrong mindfulness—a tool for sustaining exploitation. Where corporate mindfulness differs from historical patterns is one of scale and formalization. Textual, sectarian, and institutional forms of Buddhism have often emphasized interior transformation while neglecting systemic conditions—and that might be considered a weakness of sorts within the tradition itself.[42] Corporate programs exploit this tendency, packaging mindfulness as a consumable technique while leaving ethical and structural questions unaddressed. The result is not the domestication of Buddhism itself, but the large-scale appropriation of its practices for capitalist ends—turning an ancient path to liberation into a set of tools for managing human labor.

[42] By emphasizing interior transformation and the cultivation of personal insight, Buddhist traditions—like many contemplative paths—tend to underemphasize systemic, structural, and material conditions. As Slavoj Žižek (for all his idiosyncratic readings) has suggested, any practice focused primarily on individual liberation runs the risk of being abstracted from social reality, creating what Purser calls a "spiritual loophole" that can be harnessed to sustain rather than challenge unjust systems (See Žižek, "Western Marxism"; Purser, *McMindfulness*, 12). Corporate mindfulness exploits precisely this weakness: it leverages a centuries-old path to liberation while leaving intact the social, economic, and ecological structures that generate suffering.

## The Compassionate CEO: A Contradiction in Terms?

This has all been said before. But I would like to push further in the direction of structural transformation. The logical endpoint of corporate mindfulness is the "compassionate CEO" or "conscious capitalist": a leader who meditates daily, speaks about interconnection and compassion, and simultaneously presides over a corporation that extracts surplus value, externalizes environmental costs, and prioritizes shareholder returns. Silicon Valley abounds with these figures: the meditation-app CEO who union-busts, the "conscious" coffee executive sourcing beans from underpaid farmers, the mindful pharmaceutical executive pricing life-saving drugs beyond reach. These leaders are not simply hypocrites. Many no doubt genuinely believe in their own compassion and the possibility of "doing well by doing good." But this belief rests on a fundamental confusion—or deliberate obfuscation—about compassion. *Karuṇā* in Buddhism is not kindness while perpetuating exploitation. It is an active commitment to reducing suffering, which often requires refusing to participate in systems that generate harm.

This problem is not limited to the mindfulness industry. Socially Engaged Buddhism shows a similar tendency. Thich Nhat Hanh, in *The Art of Power* (2007) and *Good Citizens* (2012), links spiritual power to material success: "By focusing on our spiritual power, we can change our bottom line from pure profit to one that includes compassion. We don't need to get rid of profit. Compassion can bring financial and political success" (*Art of Power* 4). He develops this further in "Taking Care of Nonbusiness," using his concept of Interbeing to explain business success: just as a flower or sheet of paper contains non-flower or non-paper elements, so too does business rely on "nonbusiness elements" (*Art of Power* 139). Employees must care for themselves and one another, and leaders must care for employees. Everything will then

be fine.[43] This is, I argue, deeply unsatisfying—even if it may be orthodox in a certain interpretation of Buddhism. By this logic, the problem is individual neglect, and the solution is essentially stress management or self-care, with the broader logic of global capitalism ignored.[44] Capitalism itself is invisible; environmental devastation becomes a matter of personal responsibility, and the idealized entrepreneur is assumed to have the moral capacity to self-correct (*Art of Power* 145).[45]

But why stop there? Why do corporations—especially monopolistic ones—exist at all? Why must we work under conditions not of our choosing, or work at all, to survive (Chomsky 366)? Buddhists may not have ready answers, but we can at least challenge the assumption that our current system of labor is natural or inevitable.

Another, related concern is the paternalistic overtones in Thich Nhat Hanh's economic vision. His ideal is a benevolent, powerful leader—CEO, president, or king—who embodies spiritual virtues and treats subordinates with compassion, invoking the Mauryan emperor

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[43] Although I am wary of the narrative of "realism"—which often hides dubious (i.e., Hobbesian or Social Darwinian) assumptions about human beings, Buddhists need to be realistic with respect to the way that capitalism works. It bears repeating that as a broad system, capitalism does not require any particular intention, other than the profit motive (see Chomsky 76). This fact may be why it is so difficult for Buddhists to come to terms with capitalism.

[44] In certain places, Nhat Hanh does seem quite close to an analysis of alienation under capitalist labor forms but ultimately moralizes the problem into one of personal desire for more stuff.

[45] See, in contrast, Chomsky's remarks about the "propaganda system" in which the range of debate on important economic and political issues is heavily circumscribed—e.g., in the United States between Democrats and Republicans—and "only serves to enhance the strength of the assumptions, ingraining them in people's minds as the entire possible spectrum of opinion that there is" (13). In theory, at least, Buddhist teachings and practices should excel at opening new ways of thinking and being—what Chomsky refers to as an increase in subjectively (in addition to objectively) available options (203).

Aśoka as a model of the Dhammarājā (*Art of Power* 39).[46] Here, Buddhist compassion becomes compatible with hierarchical domination rather than a challenge to it. Can one compassionately extract surplus value? Mindfully lay off workers to boost profits? Consciously destroy ecosystems for shareholder returns? From a critical Buddhist perspective, the answer must be no. One can cultivate psychological equanimity while doing harm, but such equanimity in service of exploitation is not a virtue—it is *moha*, delusion in its most sophisticated form. The problem, however, is less the moral character of particular individuals than the structural imperatives of the role itself. Even a well-intentioned and reflective executive may find that the institutional logic of profit maximization systematically conflicts with the reduction of suffering.

It is important to be clear about what this claim does and does not assert. Buddhism has always been practiced within imperfect economic systems. Lay followers in the Buddha's time engaged in trade, agriculture, and governance; they were not required or expected to withdraw from economic life. The point, however, is not that practitioners must inhabit a morally pristine world before they can cultivate compassion. It is that certain institutional structures *systematically generate harm* in ways that cannot be neutralized by individual virtue alone. A CEO who meditates sincerely may well be kinder than one who does not; yet if the role itself requires the prioritization of shareholder return, competitive growth, and cost externalization, then compassion becomes structurally constrained. The argument here concerns not personal hypocrisy but systemic logic.

[46] The invocation of Aśoka is particularly telling, as it represents an idealized top-down model of Buddhist governance that leaves hierarchical power structures entirely intact while merely hoping for benevolent rulers. This is precisely the model that corporate mindfulness replicates: enlightened leadership within unquestioned structures of domination.

As a final caveat, capitalism is not monolithic. Legal frameworks, social protections, and regulatory institutions shape the experience of workers and the environment differently across societies. Scandinavian social democracies, for example, mitigate some of the most extreme harms of exploitation through robust labor rights, welfare provision, and environmental regulation. Japan and much of continental Europe present distinct forms of capitalist organization, and even in these contexts, corporations operate within constraints that the United States largely eschews. Yet these variations, while significant for everyday experience, do not alter the fundamental logic of capitalist accumulation: the structural imperative to extract surplus, externalize costs, and subordinate human and ecological well-being to profit. From a radical Buddhist perspective, such systems—even the "milder" variants—remain ethically incompatible with genuine compassion, because they institutionalize suffering and craving. Acknowledging nuance does not imply that incremental reforms are sufficient; it simply situates our critique within the diversity of capitalist arrangements while maintaining the structural insight that the CEO's role and corporate hierarchies generate harm regardless of the regulatory environment.

## Making Our Graduates Better Exploiters

We can return to our Bucknell graduates with new clarity about what their elite education has prepared them for. As noted above, roughly twenty-five percent enter financial services, and another twenty-four percent enter professional and business services at companies like Goldman Sachs, Deloitte, and ExxonMobil. Many will carry with them mindfulness practices and Buddhist concepts encountered on campus—through courses, wellness programs, study abroad in Buddhist countries, or meditation retreats. But these practices are unlikely to provoke moral questioning about their employers. Corporate

mindfulness teaches them to tolerate the cognitive dissonance of bullshit and batshit work: to be "present" while facilitating climate change, maintain "equanimity" while extracting wealth from vulnerable populations, and cultivate "acceptance" of meaningless tasks. In short, they become more resilient, effective servants of capital—not despite their Buddhist training, but because of how it has been reframed within the corporate context. This is the ultimate domestication of Buddhism: transforming a tradition whose founder renounced wealth and power into a set of techniques for helping people accept and even optimize participation in systems of exploitation. *Paṭinissagga* (renunciation), *nekkhamma* (turning away), and radical refusal are erased. What remains is Buddhism as human resources management.

This argument does not presume a society of fully enlightened beings. For better or worse, Buddhist thought has always been gradualist: craving is not eradicated overnight but weakened through shifts in understanding, practice, and conditions. The point is not that a different economic system would eliminate *taṇhā* altogether. It is that institutions participate in conditioning mental states. Some arrangements inflame craving by normalizing competition, perpetual growth, and manufactured dissatisfaction; others may attenuate it by emphasizing sufficiency, reciprocity, and restraint. The critique advanced here rests on this conditional logic. Contemporary capitalism—particularly in its neoliberal and hyper-consumerist forms—does not merely coexist with craving; it organizes social life around its continual stimulation and monetization.

At this point, one might object that such reflections verge on utopianism. But the argument advanced here does not depend on the feasibility of a fully realized post-capitalist Buddhist society, nor does it offer a detailed economic blueprint. Its claim is more modest and more analytic: that the current organization of labor is historically

contingent, ethically fraught, and conceptually incompatible with core Buddhist commitments to the reduction of suffering and the cessation of craving. To question the necessity of forty-hour workweeks, perpetual growth, and the commodification of attention is not to indulge in fantasy; it is to refuse the naturalization of a particular economic order. Critical theory—Marxist or Buddhist—begins precisely by *denaturalizing* what presents itself as inevitable. If this appears utopian, it may be only because the horizon of political imagination has narrowed so dramatically under late capitalism.

## Practical Implications: Buddhism Beyond Bullshit and Batshit

This reframing is not merely diagnostic. It suggests several practical, though provisional, directions for reconfiguring labor and livelihood vis-à-vis Buddhist ethical commitments. These proposals should not be read as a comprehensive blueprint for a future society but as exploratory directions for reducing forms of work that generate suffering. Structural change, like ethical cultivation itself, is likely to occur gradually through experimentation, reform, and collective learning.

### *1. Universal basic income as modern* dāna

The Buddhist practice of *dāna* (generosity) traditionally supported monastics in their practice, providing the material conditions that made contemplative life possible. Contemporary proposals such as Universal Basic Income (UBI) or Universal Basic Services (UBS) can be understood in a similar light: not as charity, but as collective mechanisms for securing the material foundations of human flourishing. By guaranteeing basic income, housing, healthcare, education, or transportation, such policies would allow individuals greater freedom to refuse both

bullshit jobs that generate little social value and batshit jobs that cause direct harm. Recent pilot programs—from Finland's national basic income experiment to smaller municipal trials in North America and Europe—suggest that unconditional income supports can reduce stress, improve wellbeing, and increase economic security without significantly diminishing social participation. At the same time, critics have raised concerns that cash transfers alone could be used to justify the erosion of public goods and social welfare programs. For this reason, many scholars and activists now emphasize Universal Basic Services as a more structurally transformative approach. From a Buddhist perspective, approaches such as Universal Basic Services may be especially compelling insofar as they treat the necessities of life—food, shelter, healthcare, and education—not as commodities to be purchased in competitive markets but as shared conditions for human flourishing. In this respect, such proposals echo an older Buddhist intuition already embodied in the early *saṅgha*: that the material basis for ethical and contemplative life should be secured collectively rather than left to the uncertainties of the market.

### *2. Radical work-hour reduction*

Rather than proliferating unnecessary jobs to preserve the ideology of "full employment"—a dynamic analyzed sharply by David Graeber—a Buddhist political economy would ask a simpler question: how much labor is necessary for collective material reproduction? Experiments with four-day workweeks gesture in the right direction but remain timid. What might become possible with a twenty-hour week? Or fifteen? Reducing wage labor to what is socially necessary would create space for caregiving, civic participation, contemplative practice, artistic production, and ecological restoration. The point is not idleness but the reorientation of time toward non-commodified forms of value.

### *3. Collective refusal of harmful work*

A Buddhist ethics of right livelihood cannot remain confined to individual consumer choice or private moral scruple. It must extend to collective refusal. Workers declining employment in the defense industry, fossil fuel extraction, predatory finance, and other structurally harmful sectors should not be cast as isolated moral heroes but supported as participants in broader movements of transformation. Here the resources of organized labor, climate justice activism, and the older left vision of a "popular front" become crucial. Ethical refusal becomes viable only when embedded in solidaristic networks that redistribute risk and sustain material survival.

### *4. Degrowth economics and voluntary simplicity*

The Buddhist emphasis on contentment (*santuṭṭhi*) and the critique of craving resonate strongly with contemporary degrowth theory, articulated by thinkers such as Jason Hickel and Saitō Kōhei. If infinite growth on a finite planet is biophysically impossible, then the pursuit of perpetual expansion appears not merely imprudent but delusional. Degrowth is not austerity in disguise; it is a revaluation of sufficiency over accumulation. From a Buddhist perspective, liberation from the "hedonic treadmill" is not deprivation but freedom from structurally induced dissatisfaction.

### *5. Rebuilding commons and gift economies*

Finally, beyond both state redistribution and market exchange lies the possibility of revitalizing commons-based and gift-oriented practices. Mutual aid networks, community gardens, tool libraries, time banks, and other reciprocal institutions enact forms of *dāna* outside the wage

relation. As Elinor Ostrom demonstrated in her work on commons governance, shared resources need not collapse into tragedy when structured through collective norms and participatory management. Such spaces should not be dismissed as marginal experiments; they may prefigure alternative centers of economic life grounded in reciprocity rather than commodification.

## Graduate Outcomes Revisited

Let us return, one final time, to that glossy brochure: *Class of 2023 Graduate Outcomes*. What would it mean if Bucknell University truly educated for "meaningful and purposeful experiences"?[47] Perhaps, instead of celebrating that twenty-five percent of graduates entered financial services, we would pause to ask why such a proportion feels inevitable. Instead of prominently featuring placements at Goldman Sachs or ExxonMobil, we might publicly affirm students who declined such employment on ethical grounds. Instead of measuring institutional success by median starting salary, we might celebrate graduates who chose to work less, live more simply, and devote substantial time to community, creativity, caregiving, and serious practice.

Such a shift would require more than modest reform of career services. It would entail a fundamental reorientation of the educational project itself. Students would be encouraged to ask not, "What job can I get?" but "What world do I want to help create?" Not, "How can I maximize my income?" but "How little do I actually need?" Not, "What is my career trajectory?" but "How can I minimize the degree to which my life

[47] Along with the stock-in-trade references to "leadership" and "success," Bucknell's own Mission Statement gestures towards a more holistic and surprisingly "moral" educational mandate: "Bucknell seeks to educate our students to serve the common good and to promote justice in ways sensitive to the moral and ethical dimensions of life."

is structured around career at all?" Within our present institutional ecology, this may appear naïve, even irresponsible. Yet from a Buddhist perspective, it is the prevailing system—with its proliferation of bullshit and batshit jobs, its rhetoric of corporate mindfulness and "conscious capitalism," and its routine sacrifice of human and ecological well-being to shareholder value—that appears profoundly deluded. The radical Buddhist alternative is not an escapist fantasy. It is closer to a recovery of sanity: an acknowledgment of interdependence, a commitment to minimizing harm, and a collective effort to free time and energy for what genuinely matters.

## Right Living as Right Refusal

In the end, *Right Living* in the age diagnosed by David Graeber may signify something far more confrontational than the bland injunction to find a job that "aligns with your values." It means refusing bullshit work that deadens the spirit and batshit work that materially destroys the conditions of life. It means declining the seductions of corporate mindfulness programs that train employees to endure exploitation with equanimity. It means rejecting the narrative that waged employment is the axis of human dignity and that one's moral worth is indexed to productivity. Right Living, so understood, is an insistence on time: time for rest, for relationships, for creativity, for political participation, for genuine ethical and contemplative cultivation. It requires building economic institutions oriented toward liberation rather than accumulation. It asks us to take seriously one of Buddhism's most radical claims: that the cessation of suffering depends upon relinquishing craving—including the institutionalized craving for perpetual growth and productivity that structures contemporary capitalism.

According to tradition, Gautama Buddha renounced wealth, status, and political power in order to seek awakening for himself and others. His followers, recognizing the value of community, extended this to a collective refusal of prevailing conditions, creating with the *sangha* an alternative model (one with, arguably, quasi-democratic aspects). Our historical conditions differ, but these gestures retain their provocation. Perhaps the task today is not to locate personal meaning within a fundamentally disordered system, but to participate in its gradual, collective renunciation. Not an individual flight into monastic withdrawal or privatized mindfulness, but the shared construction of economic arrangements capable of sustaining genuine human flourishing. Not mindful accommodation to bullshit and batshit labor, but organized refusal coupled with institution-building. A Buddhist critique of labor, then, does not ultimately demand "better jobs" within the same horizon of growth and competition. It gestures toward less work, more freedom. Not compassionate CEOs, but democratic control over economic life. Not therapeutic adaptation to structural harm, but structural transformation in the direction of collective well-being. This is Right Living for our time: a politics of refusal joined to the practice of mutual aid and the patient expansion of what might once have been called the realm of freedom. Just as Marx envisioned the realm of freedom beyond necessity, radical Buddhist refusal envisions liberation beyond the tyranny of waged labor.

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