

Poverty and its Measurement: Buddhism Perspective

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Poverty means lacking the basic material requirements for leading a decent life free from hunger, exposure and disease. The basic needs of a monastic provide a useful benchmark: food sufficient to alleviate hunger and maintain one's health, clothing sufficient to be socially decent and to protect the body, shelter sufficient for serious engagement with cultivating the mind, and health care sufficient to cure and prevent disease. According to Buddhism poverty is bad because it involves dukkha, best translated as "ill-being" in this context. It means that poverty involves suffering. As a philosophy of living which advocates the elimination of suffering, Buddhism does not value poverty. Buddhism values detachment towards material goods in commending having less wants as a virtue. Poverty, as ordinarily understood, consists in the non-possession of the basic material requirements for leading a decent life free from hunger, malnutrition and disease. Therefore overcoming of poverty should not be understood as the proliferation of more and more desires and wants which are to be satisfied by more and more consumables produced. In this connection the important distinction between people's needs and people's wants should be recognized. The proliferation of wants may temporarily result in the elimination of poverty in the material sense but eventually lead to a different kind of poverty which is even more harmful to mankind than the one it has replaced. Buddhism considers the proliferation of wants as the cause of human misery. Therefore, from the Buddhist perspective poverty cannot be measured purely on the basis of the material criterion of the quantity of goods people consume.

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