

“The Joyless Economy”: The Pathology of a Culture Which Calls For an Awakening

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“It is no measure of health to be well-adjusted to a profoundly sick society”.
(Krishnamurti)

“Existing scientific research on the value of materialism yields clear and scientific findings. People who are highly focused on materialistic values have lower personal well-being and psychological health than those who believe that materialistic values are unimportant. These relationships have been documented in samples of people ranging from wealthy to the poor, from the teenagers to the elderly, and from Australians to South Koreans” (Tim Kasser, 2002, 22)

Part I

Dimensions of Time in Our Lives

“Known under several terms: anguish, ennui, tedium, doldrums, humdrum, apathy... lethargy, languor, boredom is a complex phenomenon. I believe no liberal arts college prepares you for that eventuality. Neither the humanities nor the sciences offer courses on boredom.” -Joseph Brodsky, “Listening to Boredom”

Have you ever realized that paradoxically the nature of ‘boredom’ is an exceptionally interesting subject? Joseph Brodsky, speaking at a commencement address to students in a school had a strange way of raising the spirits of the students: to talk on ‘boredom’. Boredom is a window to the properties of time and understanding boredom with wisdom is the key to living in the present. An hour for one person comes in a flash—he is rushing against losing time; for another, it’s a grey block of drudgery—when will this pass away; but for the fully absorbed, it is eternity! With all the labor saving devices, we have much less time, and this accounts for the “Manic quality of daily life” (Loy & Goodhew, 2005, 166). Increased stress at work and school, sleep deprivation, burnout and workaholism are the manifestations of the “time-compression effect”. For people crushed by poverty, without a job, Brodsky says, “it is a brutal part of their misery”. Being mindful of all these seeming paradoxes, contradictions and flashes of insight about boredom, is in the context of this paper, the first stage towards a deep understanding of the roots of this pathology. Apart from the art of this commodifying time as resources for buying and selling, we also need to explore more creative dimensions of time- the authentic paths of a new social awakening

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This paper explores something more than a recipe for happiness, as it is necessary to find **the roots of a pathology**, which has not merely generated a collapse of the world's biggest economies but at a more ordinary level why by some kind of repetitive compulsion, people are tied down to the so-called 'hedonic treadmill'; why they think that by acquiring more things one could have more happiness, that 'more' is 'better'; why consumer spending is more directed towards stimulation than obtaining necessities and basic comforts for living; why like the proverbial monkey, which has his hand stuck with the banana in a wooden box, as the way out with the banana is too small to get out--why not let go the banana and release the hand with comfort. In his well known book, *Joyless Economy*, Tibor Scitowski describes how people can go beyond the 'hedonic treadmill', by spending on creativity and novelty as music, literature and the arts. We tend to overvalue the utility we get from physical goods and according to neurological studies, they have found that the brain has two subsystems, one dealing with what one wants and the other with what one likes, and the 'want' related system dominates. "*The two are after all logically quite distinct. You could crave for something very much, but take little or no pleasure in it once you had it*" (Nettle, 2005, 126). As Allan de Botton says, this kind of recipe for life often hides the deep discontent often found in the very bosom of affluence and they find easy access to drugs and alcohol which are the temporary pain killers of repressed discontent. In this paper, I am exploring the deeper roots for this over powering 'boredom' depicted by Scitowski. Briefly, his ideal is "activities pursued for their own sake", and he says that though Alfred Marshall the economist realized this, he did not understand how to integrate this concept into his economics (Scitowski, 1992, 291) as he was a slave of the existing framework of economic theory. He says a great challenge is to "induce that ever-larger segment of the population, which has more time and on its hands energy than it knows how to use it" (296).

Four Dimensions for Understanding Boredom

In the article I presented to the 2010 UNDV Conference (de Silva, 2010), I cited four dimensions of well-being: *cognitive*, *conative* (motivational), *affective* and *attentional*. It is of great interest to discern that on the issue about 'boredom', its negative features as well as the positive way out could be charted out around this four-fold structure (also, see Wallace and Shapiro, 2006). In the context of the present study: (i) 'Boredom' is at its roots an attentional crisis and this would be a central tenet of this paper. (ii) Boredom is also due to apathy and lack of motivational power: As Michael Stocker observes with great acumen, "Through spiritual or physical tiredness, through *accidie*, through weakness of body, through illness, through general apathy, through despair, through inability to concentrate, through a feeling of uselessness or futility, and so on, one may feel less motivated to seek what is good." (Stocker, 1996). But he also says that this lack of interest does not mean that there is no good to be obtained in the world, and there is the added depression: one sees all the good to be won, but lacks the will and strength of purpose to pursue the good. (iii) The emotional casualties come to the surface in the form of emptiness, dissonance, the drab dullness and a great deal of misery which features well in alcohol and drug addicts who succumb to temporary pleasures near at hand missing the long term happiness. (iv) The cognitive dimension is often almost invisible as in the case of the addict -- he is in a vicious circle: He

feels normal when he takes the drug and becomes abnormal when he is deprived, and thus has no clue to get out of this vicious circle. Venerable Nanavira, says that this predicament is described by the Buddha in a sutta, where a man with a skin disease is fiercely scratching the skin with his nails for temporary relief, and then it turns worse (M,I, 506-8), (Nanavira, 1987). Thus clarity of understanding, transparency, self-knowledge and wisdom present the way out of boredom and misery. In many addicts who are closer to normal life, the cognitive facet is weak, that he “knowingly courts disaster” (de Silva, 2008, 60-82). Merely, good judgment is not sufficient, unless backed by motivation and determination. In my paper presented in 2010 to UNDV, the focus was on mental and spiritual health; but in this paper, I am also focusing your attention towards social dimensions and ethics, as these are central concerns of the present conference (UNDV, 2011). As Amelie Rorty points out drug, alcohol and gambling addictions are taking “epidemiological proportions”, and education for recovery has to be on a social scale (Rorty, 1998).

Awakening to Boredom & Sickness of the Soul (la malaise du sie'cle)

To realize that boredom does not come from the object of attention but rather from the quality of attention is truly a transforming insight. Fritz Perls, one of those who brought Gestalt therapy to America, said, “Boredom is lack of attention”. Understanding this reality brings profound changes in our lives (Goldstein, 1993, 80).

Goldstein the experienced meditation teacher says that boredom often fools us into diverting our energies entirely to an external situation, person or activity and thus obstructs our liberation from the spell of the emotion.

Eric Fromm who had a very stimulating correspondence with Ven. Nyanaponika on the Buddhist way to deal with boredom says: “All the misery which is experienced by many people lie to a large extent not in the fact that they are sick but that they are separated from *everything that's interesting in life, that's exhilarating in life, that is beautiful in life*” (Fromm, 1994, 165, *The Art of Listening*). They need an increasing enlargement and intensification of their interest in life. These reflections are important, as some of the youth in the west today, have got caught up in the moral dehydration, boredom and cynicism about values.

The Pathology of Normalcy

Erich Fromm greatly influenced by Buddhist perspectives, while appreciating the value of individual self-knowledge and self-illumination, emphasized the point that instead of considering ‘pathology’ as an individual deviation from a well functioning society - there has to be a focus on the question whether the social order itself is subject to a kind of social pathology. This is a deep and profound way of looking at the contemporary crisis, which Fromm felt was the radical Buddhist perspective. When we contextualize the message of the Buddha to contemporary times, this facet of the Buddhist analysis is illuminating. *In The Art of Being* (Fromm, 1989), *To Have or To Be* (Fromm, 1976) and *The Art of Listening* (Fromm, 1994, a posthumous publication) there is a focus on the concept of *alienation*, a mode of existence in which the person feels as an alien—estranged from his own self as the center of

living and the source of his energy. Fromm observes that the dominant economic models based on the invisible and unassailable authority of the laws of the market tie people to a culture of passivity and complacency. The disappearance of personalized identity induces acquiescence to the system, where deviation is considered as heresy. The Buddhist analysis of the “lawfulness of things” (*dhamma niyāma*) provides the ground for developing a social philosophy for a more creative culture. The Buddha upheld the lawfulness in the kingdom of plants (*bīja niyāma*), laws of the seasons (*utu niyāma*), laws of the mind (*ćitta niyāma*), laws of morality (*kamma niyāma*). The laws of psychology and of morality help us to understand to a great extent the collapse of the economic order, moral degeneration and the suppressed discontent amidst apparent affluence.

Fromm’s normative humanism and recipes for boredom certainly makes sense in the context of the gradual erosion of family and social values today. People become commodities to be traded for their skills and market oriented super values erode the traditional humanistic values of compassion and cooperation. There is a healthy counter-move among Buddhists, in Australia for instance the temple has become a hub of both cultural and religious activities with participation of children and adults. Boredom is a subject that emphasizes the erosion of normative guidelines in life, and a drying up of vibrant interests that energize our lives. There is a necessary boredom and tedium endured for instance, by industrious people: by diligence and persistent effort they create lucrative innovations—that is an innocent form of boredom. Occasional boredom of the hard working man is inevitable but has to be balanced by a diversified and rich personal agenda at home—get the balance right.

The Attentional Stance

“An attentional deficit is characterized by the inability to focus on a chosen object. The mind becomes withdrawn and disengaged even from its own internal processes. Attentional hyperactivity occurs when the mind is extensively aroused, resulting in compulsive distraction and fragmentation. And attention is dysfunctional when we focus on things in afflictive ways, not conducive to our own or others’ well-being (Wallace, 2007, 8).

A deficit occurs when there is some laxity in concentration and a fresh interest in the subject or object is recommended; hyperactivity indicates that the mind is agitated and there is a need to relax, preferably a relaxing meditation; when attention is dysfunctional, there is a need for more radical thinking and opt for change of life styles and cognitive perspective. While all four dimensions, cognitive, motivational, affective and attentional interact and bringing out a cumulative resulting wisdom, the present paper is greatly focused on the attentional stance. The remedies according to the celebrated meditation teacher, well known in Thailand, Jack Kornfield, lies in the development of awareness and attention through mindfulness practice. Such practice would energize life, enlarge the area of self-knowledge, and convert the moment-to-moment flow of life into a sort of pilgrimage. As Iris Murdoch, British novelist and philosopher says, the contemplative way emphasizes that it is in the routine, prosaic, silent ordinary life, that like ants we may build moral dexterity, industriousness and integrity and life as such is converted into a pilgrimage (see, de Silva, 2002, 183). Csikzentmihalyi sounds a similar note when he says regarding the experience of

‘flow’, “Its major contribution to the quality of life consists in endowing every momentary experience with value” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has converted this contemplative dimension as a new model for education in using the concept of ‘flow’. In the experience of flow, a resonance is established between the action, external environment, and the mind. As Matthieu Ricard says, “It is the inverse of not only of boredom and depression, but also of agitation and distraction”, (Ricard, 2006, 234) and “when all is going well, this fluidity produces a sense of serene joy; self-awareness - that is, a person observing himself - is practically absent; exhaustion is forgotten; and the time passes imperceptibly, like the flow of a river...” (Ricard, 2006, 235). According to Csikszentmihalyi, one can experience flow when doing the most mundane task, such as ironing or working on a production line. Conversely without this flow, the work would become boring and unbearable. People who develop the flow experience “have curiosity and interest in life, persistence and low self-centeredness, which results in the ability to be motivated by intrinsic reward” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). But we must be aware that this concept is a tool and should be guided by wisdom, and mindfulness in the Buddhist context emphasizes this quality in all our actions.

According to the current research by the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, we obtain maximum happiness in the experience of the ‘flow’, completely immersed in what we are doing. He identified four ways of converting adversity or boredom into enjoyment: set goals, immerse yourself in the activity, pay attention to what is happening and enjoy the immediate experience. Of course the clearest paradigm of the flow is the practice of mindfulness, and its extension to daily life. The flow experience may be extended to work, leisure activities like gardening, and cooking. In this paper, I am using this paradigm of the flow experience and develop a Buddhist philosophy for getting the balance right. While the flow experience is best seen in the practice of mindfulness, it can expand to living a life of endeavor, achievement and rewarding relationships. *This is a path for awakening in Buddhism to the human dimension in our lives, and overcome the culture of ‘Greed Is Good’*. Buddhist contemplative practice has resources to build a contemplative ethics, a theme that will be developed in a latter part of this paper.

The strange paradox is that monotony/boredom is common to both the poor and the rich. For the poor boredom is the brutal part of their misery, and often takes a violent response in drug addiction. We also see that the haves and the have-nots have different versions of monotony. The meditator too confronts sloth and torpor (*thīna middha*), the workaholic see no other way than running round the office, but he too confronts this noon-tide demon, the man who punches tickets from morn till night is hardly aware that monotony has invaded him. But as Mihaly has shown, boredom is our window to the properties of time, and novel, creative and meaningful ways of spending time is the answer.

Mindful Exertion of Energy

In the practice of meditation, the most proximate cause for establishing mindfulness is the exertion of energy (*ātāpi*). *Viriya* (effort) is the energy aspect of the mind. *Ātāpi*

(*padhāna viriya*) is the initial launching of effort, which has to be followed by sustained application and a fulfilling application. The initial application involves the restraining of the sense faculties and the purification of virtues. Gradual Sayings (ii, 115) compares the four types of horses to four different contexts among monks for the kind of stirring and the sense of urgency for liberation: the horse which is not stirred when he sees the stick but if he is pricked with the stick; the second when the coat is pricked; third, when the flesh is pierced with the stick; fourth, pierced to the very bones. First the monk is stirred by hearing of death; second he encounters and sees death; third, his own blood-relation is dead; fourth the monk is struck by personal pain and grievous and sharp sensations. The concept of *saṃvega* a kind of spiritual stirring is a proximate cause for the initiation of energy. This is a good description of *existential angst* developed by Kierkegaard and Sartre. The Buddha felt that experiencing tragedy and grief cuts across the complacency of people tied to the hedonic treadmill. Tsunamis, earthquakes, bushfires and floods are timely reminders of the thin threads that run through the hedonic treadmill and the stress and strains of our lives - events that emphasize the need for a more contemplative life and also re-connect with those in the thick of human suffering through compassion.

Part II

Getting the Balance Right: The Buddhist Work Ethic

“Since folk are ablaze with unlawful lusts, overwhelmed by depraved longings, obsessed by wrong doctrines, on such as these the sky rains not down steadily. It is hard to get a meal. The crops are affected with mildew and grown to mere stubs. Accordingly many come by their end. That Brahmin is the reason why... things are so” (Gradual Sayings, I, 159.)

If the Buddhist personal quest for insight and transformation excludes a concern for others, life becomes imbalanced and disharmonious, a point accepted in both the Buddhist and Christian monastic traditions. The Buddha’s sermons over the years present innumerable contexts, where the Buddha gave advice both on the secular and spiritual facets of good living. In the *Cakkavattisīhanāda Sutta* and the *Kūṭadanta Sutta*, it is shown that in a society where the basic material needs of the people are not met, people feel a sense of oppression and exploitation and they may resort to crime and thus subject to social unrest and moral degeneration. When the celestial wheel of governing kings sinks down and has no proper law enforcement, with poverty, there is de-stabilization and conflicts and dissensions emerge. The *Aggañña Sutta* which presents a fanciful myth describing a world cycle also points out that moral dimensions of life have an impact on natural processes. The kings were expected to respect the lawful nature of things (*dhamma niyāma*) and the wheel turning monarchs were to be guided by the tenfold *dasarājā dhamma*. The *Sīgālovāda Sutta* presents over the years the best guide to family life. What all these references indicate is that good values and adherence to good values need to permeate the economic and social life of people. It is also necessary to develop a Buddhist work ethic (de Silva, 2002, 201-212). In the contemporary world, the breakdown of the linkages between life, work and home are making it difficult to

restore a fulfilling and balanced family life, and more than ever the message of the Buddha has a great relevance today. An interesting project to integrate mindfulness practice in meaningful work and right livelihood was found in a practical project by Claude Whitmyer (Whitmyer, 1994). This project is transforming workplace experience into a spiritual discipline. The Briarpatch Society that he organized demonstrates that good business need not to be synonymous with greed and corruption.

“At work, people are frustrated by organizational politics, daunted by ever increasing workloads and always feel a threat of retrenchment and redundancy... I have found that this is exactly why work is a wonderful place for personal, emotional and spiritual transformation... no matter how we judge a situation, we always have control over how we deal with it - this is the secret to personal freedom, joy and peace of mind.” (Cairnes, 1998, 3-4) But to comprehend things in this way one needs a special kind of intelligence, a blending of intellect and spirit, engaging one’s character and spurring the moral imagination. In facing life’s challenges, we can work at a deeper level, and it is in times of need, that we break habitual barriers between ourselves and others and experience that sense of interconnectedness to others. Such qualities of ‘emotional intelligence’ are today considered as the *human element in sound economic and social policy*. E.F. Schumacher who is a pioneer in developing the concept of Buddhist economics says that it is due to some metaphysical blindness that some economists consider labor as a necessary evil, where as for the Buddhist it is a vital expression of their quest for meaning: “to give a man a chance to utilize and develop his faculties; to enable him to overcome his egocenteredness by joining hands with other people in a common task, and bring forth the goods and services necessary for a becoming existence” (Schumacher, 1974). Real happiness from work comes from being purposefully occupied, looking for fulfillment, stimulation and friendship. In the Buddha’s advice on economic activity there are three facets: production of wealth by hard work, acquired skills and enthusiasm (*u□□hāna sampadā*); protection of wealth from thieves, water and from association with loose women, drinking and gambling (*ārakkha sampadā*) and living within one’s means (*samajīvikatā*). These features form the foundations of a philosophy of self-reliance (A, Iv 322, A II, 67). The Buddha also refers to four types of bliss enjoyed by the householder which combines economic security and a healthy moral outlook. There was also an emphasis on saving, and the Buddha considered such thriftiness as a golden mean between miserliness and extravagance. There was also a balancing of the budget: one part of the earnings to support the wage earner, family and for good causes; the second for investments; and the third for future needs. It has been observed that today the kingdom of Bhutan is a paradigm example of a kingdom that follows these features of self-reliance.

The Buddhist Contemplative Approach for Social & Spiritual Awakening

The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character and will. An education which should improve this faculty would be the education par excellence. But it is easier to define this ideal than to give practical instructions for bringing it about. (William James, Principles of Psychology, 1950, 424).

We have made a journey together to identify the contours of well-being in Buddhism and the notion of getting the balance right, and also made a diagnosis of the roots and manifestation of the pathology that ‘greed is good culture’. On the positive paths for awakening we have looked at the Buddhist contemplative approach and the notion of ‘flow’ and then also looked at the Buddhist work ethic. We have also realized that people fall a prey to many counterfeit forms of happiness which bring temporary relief. Another important aspect of the conference theme is the role of **Buddhist virtues in social transformation**. Now, I raise the question: Is it possible to develop a Buddhist ethics through the ‘contemplative way’? There have been attempts to blend inner wisdom and outer compassionate action in socially engaged Buddhism as in the typology used in Ken Jones’s *The Social Face of Buddhism* (Jones, 1989). But to build a Buddhist ethics within the contemplative tradition has yet to be done - a model different from the western models of Kantian, Utilitarian and Aristotelian ethics. Though Aristotelian virtue ethics bears some affinity to Buddhist ethics, ethics in the contemplative tradition is not found in any of these three dominant traditions. There has been one moral philosopher, who stands out from the other moral philosophers in the west, and that is Iris Murdoch. As a novelist she was enthralled by the moment-to-moment flow of life: “I regard the (daily, hourly, minutely) attempted purification as the central and fundamental ‘arena of morality.’” (Murdoch, 1992, 293). According to the Buddha, the wellsprings of morality need to be harnessed from this moment to moment flow of attention, and as William James observed, bringing back a wondering attention, over and over again is “the very root of judgment, character and will”. Through her novels she saw a very important link between psychology and ethics. Secondly, Murdoch came to focus on the complexity, variety and diversity of contexts for moral reflection and this ‘contextualism’ is a noteworthy feature of the Buddha’s teaching. The Buddha did not place people in black and white moral categories but varied his techniques to suit different people. Thirdly, Murdoch says that most British philosophy at the time was dominated by the “Rule-obedience” model: making a choice and endorsing a principle was crucial; but she says that the question: “what shall I do?” - has to be integrated with the question: “What does my life add up to?” Moral philosophy involves a more reflective turn of mind than the ability to vary choices. *Sati* is the basic moment-to-moment awareness; *sati-sampajañña* brings in clear comprehension of purpose, and *yoniso manasikāra* is to reflect wisely, linking mindfulness to wisdom. Thus, the texture of Buddhist ethics is deeper and ‘thicker’ than the dominant western models (de Silva, 2011, SLABS conference).

All what I have said about contemplative ethics has been neatly summarized by Matthieu Ricard: “Buddhist ethics is not a way of acting but a way of being. A human being endowed with loving-kindness, compassion and wisdom will spontaneously act in an ethical way because he or she is “good at heart.” (Ricard,2003, 239) Goodness has become second nature, **which is an ‘embodiment’ rather than some acquisition of knowledge**. Buddhist ethics is a rich tapestry of moral skills functioning at three levels:

1. Virtues of conscientiousness: veracity, truthfulness and righteousness
2. Virtues of benevolence: loving kindness, compassion, appreciative joy and equanimity

3. Virtues of self-restraint: self-control, abstinence, contentment, patience, celibacy and chastity.

These are all virtues of embodiment.

In conclusion, at the levels of ethics (morality), mindfulness practice and the development of insight and wisdom, we have charted out a pathway for a new sense of social awakening.

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