Money and Power

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Tips of the Day · 4 min read

When it comes to money and power, the Buddha, of a very different age, has only general guidelines for us today. For instance, here is a wise counsellor advising his king:You majesty, the country is beset by thieves. It is ravaged; villages and towns are being destroyed … If your majesty were to tax this region that would be the wrong thing to do. If you majesty (were) to get rid of this plague of robbers by executions and imprisonment … the plague would not be ended properly. Those who survive would later harm the realm. However, this plan will eliminate the plague … to (farmers) let Your Majesty distribute grain and fodder; to those in trade, capital; those in government service, a proper living wageD.N5 (In the Buddha's Words by Bhikkhu Bodhi)The teaching of the Buddha spread through different cultures in the east and established 'medieval' societies. With the onset of the industrial revolution, the tech. revolution and modernism, even post-modernism, the Dhamma has yet to be fully adapted.The combination of money and power can be lethal and the discrepancy between the one-percenters and high earners (including those who head Charities!) and the lowest paid is undermining social cohesion. There are economists who say it is bad for the economy! How might we consider a change, for it is our civic duty to have a perspective on the financial, social and political landscape?Christianity has been in the thick of change and heavily challenged. It has over time had various responses and perhaps one that comes close to the Buddha's way of thinking is Distributism.This is a social doctrine developed by the Catholic Church which is often described as a middle ground between Capitalism and Socialism. But actually it has deep roots in Catholic social doctrine.It is based on the idea of equality which is expressed in the terms subsidiarity and solidarity. These words will not come as a surprise. Subsidiarity, a word we may have become familiar with when we 'were' EU members, actually originated in the Catholic Church. In politics, it is 'the principle that a central authority should have a subsidiary function, performing only those tasks which cannot be performed at a more local level'. The word became prominent in EU after the 80's, fearful of central control – the ogre of Brussels! And solidarity defined as 'unity or agreement of feeling or action, especially among individuals with a common interest; mutual support within a group', is a core principle of unions.The argument is based on seeing the fallacy of both Capitalism and Socialism as giving ownership either to the boss or to the state. Ownership is another word for control. Distributism is searching for a way to give back ownership to everyone on the understanding that the dispossessed would then have greater control and greater power both in the local community (subsidiarity) and at higher levels of governments by forming pressure groups (solidarity).There is a simple psychological reason for ownership in that the owner takes better care than one who rents or works for. I've rented and bought a house; I've worked for someone and I have worked for myself; so to me this is obvious.This may be a no-no for some Buddhists who think all possession is wrong. Or as Proudhon, the first person to declare

himself an anarchist, would say, ‘All property is theft!’ It may come a surprise that a monastic ‘owns’ their robes and bowl. In fact, every time I get a new set of robes, I have to put a ‘bindu’, a mark, on it to distinguish it as my own. There was a bit of ‘all property is theft’ going on and monks made off with other monks robes. Since they didn’t ‘possess’ them, how could it be ‘taking what is not freely given’!It’s not what we possess, but how we possess which presents the problem, of course. When someone makes off with the mobile, we still go around saying someone stole my mobile. But it’s hardly mine since the thief possesses it! Possession of things is a legal construct and can be an attachment. But when we realise that actually we can only use objects, we free ourselves of a lot of stress and possessiveness. So just a monastic ‘owns’ their robes, so an individual can ‘own’ his property, ‘own’ her business.As for solidarity, it is core sangha principle. To quote an well known saying of the Buddha: Admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie is actually the whole of the holy life. By which we can include society as a whole. And we are much more likely to build societal solidarity when all people feel they have something to cherish and something to defend – their property or business. In the political jargon – a stakeholder.Self-esteem is based upon the ability to make decisions for oneself, to take responsibility for them and so have power over one’s life. This, of course, can never be complete power. But the more power we have, the greater our self-esteem and the respect of others – and our sense of responsibility.So it is that power and riches feed one another for better or for worse.You may be interested in this documentary about the Capitalist System.Four Horsemen - Feature Documentary - Official Versionhttps://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5fbvquHSPJU

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.