



Buddhist bodhisattva capitalism and the social-contractarian view of distribution

A comparative analysis of Buddhist economic thought and the social-contractarian view of distribution

Academic
presentation slides

June 22, 2025



Table of Contents

1. Research background and problem statement
2. The concept and characteristics of Buddhist bodhisattva capitalism
3. The historical background of Buddhist bodhisattva capitalism
4. The key economic activities and doctrines of Buddhism
5. The Buddhist view of the state and distribution policy
6. The Buddhist value theory: dependent origination and the labor theory of value
7. Comparative analysis with social contractarianism

8. Appendix: Buddhist scriptures

Research background and problem statement



- Buddhist economic thought has recently drawn renewed attention alongside the spread of ecologism in India.
- Its distinction from Confucian and Taoist economic thought: a focus on distribution rather than production; illuminating the distributive view of Buddhist bodhisattva capitalism through comparison
- with social contractarianism

The concept and characteristics of Buddhist bodhisattva capitalism



- Economic thought grounded in the theory of dependent origination (緣起論)

All beings and phenomena are connected

- through mutual causal relationships.

A distribution-centered, ethics-centered economic thought

An emphasis on fair distribution that stresses equity and justice over efficiency

An economic outlook based on mutual altruism and the bodhisattva spirit

An emphasis on human duty, communal welfare, and natural cyclicity

The historical background of Buddhist bodhisattva capitalism



- Transmission to the West: Matteo Ricci introduced Buddhism to the West
 - In medieval Europe, the 'bodhisattva' was also known under the name 'Josaphat.'

● Influence on Kant's deontological ethics

The principle of antinomy is similar to the Buddhist concepts of the 'Middle (中),' 'Emptiness (空),' and 'Zero (零).'

● Schopenhauer's and Nietzsche's reception of Buddhist thought

Schopenhauer: interpreted the thing-in-itself as 'will' and as 'suffering (苦).'

Nietzsche: attended to Buddhism's thought of self-salvation and the 'recovery of the self-centered.'

The key economic activities and doctrines of Buddhism



- **The cyclic view of formation-abiding-decay-emptiness (成住壞空) — the cyclicity of economic activity**

- The process by which emptiness (空) collapses and is formed anew: saving–production–circulation–distribution

- **Distribution-centered economic activity based on dependent origination (緣起)**

Property arises through dependent origination; class is not acknowledged, and fair distribution is emphasized.

- Emphasis on equity and justice rather than efficiency
"X is neither X nor -X" – valuing the fairness of distribution over movement itself

A realistic attitude toward proper economic activity

Shakyamuni Buddha: encouraged the economic activity of those who can

The Buddhist view of the state and distribution policy



- The Buddha's distribution policy: social problems stem from economic inequality, and the state must realize social fairness through redistribution policy.

Similarity to Rawls: an income distribution policy that

- maximally raises the welfare of the lowest-income class is fair, emphasizing the moral imperative of distribution.
- The case of the Kūṭadanta Sutta: building a foundation for self-reliance through the provision of a production base, capital support, and wage payment, rather than temporary poor relief

The state realizes the equal distribution of goods by providing a

production base to poor farmers, capital to merchants, and



The Buddhist value theory: dependent origination and the labor theory of value

- **The theory of dependent origination (緣起論): all phenomena are interconnected through causal relationships.**
- All things do not exist independently but stand in a relationship of mutual dependence and circulation.

Similarity to Adam Smith's labor theory of value

The source of value is human labor — a 1,000-won good is more expensive than a 500-won good because more labor was input into it.



- **'You reap what you sow' — the principle of dependent origination and the labor theory of value**
- Goods as the reward of labor: people can be distributed to fairly in proportion to the reward of their labor.

Comparative analysis with social contractarianism



- Differences in philosophical approach



Social Contractarianism

- Kant's deontological ethics
- Centered on Rawls's principles of justice
- Emphasis on social cohesion through contract
- Orientation toward a welfare state guaranteeing a minimum income



Bodhisattva capitalism

- **A worldview of dependent origination**
- **Centered on circulation and communal solidarity**
- Emphasis on infinite mutual interdependence

- **Differences in the priority of justice and circulation**

- Social contractarianism values individual freedom and the observance of contracts; Buddhism emphasizes relationships of dependent origination and ethical duty.

- Both schools of thought value fair distribution, but they differ in their philosophical grounds and approaches.

A systematic organization through a comparison table



Category	Bodhisattva capitalism	Social contractarianism/classical economics
History of influence	Influence on Kant, Schopenhauer, and others	Influence on the egalitarian thought of social contractarianism
Theory	Fair distribution according to dependent origination	Valuing fairness over efficiency
Key economic activity	Production for the sake of proper distribution	Valuing the principles of justice rather than economic logic
View of the state	A neutral state, maintaining social fairness	A basic social–security state
View of society/equality	Field of merit, field of requital, and field of poverty relief	Maintenance of a minimum income
Theory of value	No dependent origination, no distribution	The labor theory of value

Problems and directions for improvement



Buddhist bodhisattva capitalism

- ⚠ The boundaries of dependent origination are opaque.

The difficulty of setting the boundaries of dependent-origination fairness in a complex society

- ⚠ A lack of efficiency and innovation

💡 **Direction for improvement:**
The weakening of economic growth momentum due to distribution inequities: complementing the theory of dependent origination

Extending beyond individual liberation to respect for the community

Social Contractarianism

- ⚠ A lack of justification for countermeasures upon breach of contract

A lack of countermeasures upon breach of the social contract

- ⚠ Distrust of humanity and society

The modern crisis that appeared after the collapse of communism

- 💡 **Direction for improvement:** observance of duty and solidarity

Recovering the spirit of requital of grace and communal bonds

Conclusion and future tasks



- The modern significance of both schools of thought

The need for an integrative approach combining Buddhism's dependent–origination– and circulation–centered thought with social contractarianism's justice– and duty–centered thought

- **The perspective of ecologism and sustainable distribution**

The need to transform into an ecological economic outlook to resolve the environmental crisis and human alienation; reinterpreting value theory and recovering the fairness of distribution through Buddhism's cyclic economic thought

- **Directions for future research**

Seeking the complementary development of the dependent–origination character of bodhisattva capitalism and the deontology of social contractarianism; building an economic–ethics system that balances communal distribution and individual duty

- Proposing an economic model in which humanity and nature achieve harmonious coexistence

The modern convergence of Buddhism's 'recovery of symmetry' and social contractarianism's philosophy of 'community development'