OTHER WAYS OF SEEING

Too often we are too stuck in ways of seeing: how we perceive this world and our lives. This piece attempts to encourage a different way of seeing – an attempt significantly influenced by an article from www.ecodharma.com - and inspiration from Buddhist teachings and radical politics such as the Occupy movement.

For the original version of this article, go to www.ecodharma.com ('Do Dakinis Wage Class War?' - http://www.ecodharma.com/influences-articles/ecodharma-articles/2009/03/04/do-dakinis-wage-class-war-buddhist-economics-and-earth-democracy) – many thanks to them for letting me chop and change their piece.
All comments/suggestions please contact me at Norman108@clara.co.uk.
For details on Occupy go to www.occupylsx.org.

Norman Blair
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Introduction

The current economic system of global capitalism is one of the most powerful human-generated forces influencing our social relationships, shaping our environment, and conditioning our consciousness. If we are concerned about transformation of the self and the world, we had best pay it some serious attention.

It is a system that is destructive, violent, unjust. Its destruction can be seen in the environmental impact – its violence in the numbers who have died in wars and other man-made disasters – its injustice in the fact of a few controlling so much. It is harmful ecologically, physically, spiritually. Challenging the dominance of this economic system, seeing through its veneer of legitimacy, and working out how to dismantle it, is becoming increasingly necessary if we are to avoid a deepening social crisis.

Many commentators have noted the impact upon our world of the agricultural and industrial revolutions. But frequently they ignore the fact that the shift to a system of production and distribution based on exchange rather than complementarity and mutual aid was one of history's most fundamental social transformations – a transformation exerting a profound influence on social and individual identities.

Seeking remedies to our current problems we may appeal to cultural and moral trends, yet any attempt to support positive social change is likely to be ineffectual without a basic understanding of the irrationalities of the dominant economic system. We might moralize about our anti-ecological society and call for changes to personal lifestyles and attitudes, but we need to be careful not to allow this to deflect the struggle away from far reaching social change. It should not obscure the need for concerned social action and radical structural transformation. Social change comes from daring to reach out for paradise and not just from recycling glass bottles.

The current system

The current capitalist economic system has been called “the most successful religion of all time – making more converts more quickly than any other belief system in history.”(1) It is the most dynamic society ever to appear. It has mutated through many forms: the medieval market place, imperialist trading exploits and the factory based capitalism of 18th/19th century England. Following the internal market logic of “grow or die”, it has recently exploded into the extreme neo-liberal form it takes today: we live in a culture that has made a God of money. The modern religious symbol is that of plastic cards and pieces of paper, the churches have become banks and shopping centres.

Its inherent contradictions – the valuing of profit over life; the irrationality of continual growth within a limited ecosystem; the anti-democratic drift inherent in the centralisation of economic power in the hands of a few – have driven us deep into ecological crisis and social injustice. This is a social system that rewards the rich with huge bonuses and penalises the poor with cuts to welfare. What is wealth without well-being?

Taking profit and growth as its primary values, this economic system is contrary to most spiritual visions. For many of these visions, civilisation is not the multiplication and servicing of wants and craving but the purification of human character. From a spiritual perspective, economic theory stands the truth on its head by “considering goods as more important than people and consumption as more important than creative activity”. (2)

This strange inversion of values is not a glitch in the capitalist system. It is a problem that lies at its core. When we equate progress with economic growth, anything or anyone who gets in the way of the march of history had better watch out – unless they come with a price tag and a bar code.

Disenchanting the world

Current economic theory places exclusive emphasis upon one method of human knowledge: rationality. This leads to a focus on the material and the quantitative to the exclusion of the qualitative aspects of experience, and has been aptly called “the disenchantment of the world”. The qualitative aspects of experience, including everything referred to as spiritual or moral, have been increasingly marginalised from considerations about economic and social organisation. In economic discourse those dimensions of life that offer us meaning and value are systematically excluded – only the measurable and quantifiable are admitted.

This system has a limited capacity to nurture real human value. Using measurements that reduce everything to money, orthodox economists suffer from a profound blindness. Money might measure profits, but it is useless when it comes to measuring forests, or human worth, or species, or community, or human happiness and well-being. As a result almost any economic activity is viewed as a sign of social progress.

Take for example the $800 million that Los Angeles motorists spend a year on petrol sitting in traffic jams. That standard indicator of growth, the GDP, “adds this enthusiastically to the national accounts, unable to question whether it is really a sign of progress after all.” (3) At the same time it is clear that continuous economic growth beyond a certain level does not equate to progress measured in terms of well-being and happiness. While the UK economy as measured by GDP has doubled since 1970, surveys have shown that people’s satisfaction with their lives has remained the same.

Just how abstract and removed from people’s actual needs the financial system has become is illustrated by the figures of speculative capital that flow through the currency markets. $4 trillion flow through the international currency markets each day: this is more than double the annual GDP of India. Only 5% has productive value and the other 95% is purely speculative investment, whose non-productive nature is revealed in the investment return times of a week, a day, sometimes even seconds. These figures also indicate the disempowering of national governments in relation to the influence of international finance.

We live in a world where 1% own approximately 40% of the available wealth. Such statistics reflect the grave imbalance in society. This 1% have received pay increases and indecent bonus pots, while many others have suffered pay freezes or job losses and spend relatively significant proportions of their pay on basic costs such as food and transport. In America, 45% of unemployed people have been out of work for over six months. Long-term unemployment at this level causes stress in communities and families, and endangers people's health. The 1% get richer as things get tougher for the rest of us: this age of austerity has resulted in a significant squeezing.

Modern economics fails to take account of human values and reduces the members of a living planet into mere objects and resources – commodities to be owned, bought, sold. Experiencing subjects become lifeless objects, animals become protein conversion machines, complex ocean ecosystems become fisheries, the planet’s atmospheric regulatory systems become fossil fuel reserves: all carrying a financial figure. It is a short-sighted system: it values aspects of the world such as oil or banks, but is almost blind to children or coral reefs. Using this value system, life-giving forests are important only when they are chopped down. There is a saying: ‘forests precede civilisation – deserts follow civilisation’. Commodification does great violence to the world.

Interconnecting…

In contrast there is an approach that places emphasis on sentience and experience, on the living quality of phenomenon, out of which arise value and meaning. Recognising reality as comprised of inter-related subjects, this approach teaches a reverent and non-harmful attitude to all sentient beings and the world. It encourages us to act in ways that align ourselves with a deeper understanding of the inter-connected ecology of life. It recognises that all things in nature have a value in themselves.

The harm implicit in the pseudo-science of economics is all too evident in its ecological impact. The obsession with profit and growth makes our economic system incapable of taking into account the fact that we live on a planet with non-negotiable environmental limits. Exponential growth has accelerated past thresholds of sustainability and these old economics have been unwilling to include environmental factors on the balance sheet. It does not account for the use of natural resources as expenditure, even though the use of non-renewable resources is clearly a false economy. (4)

The growth-based model is highly deluded as to its ongoing viability and amounts to an act of violence against all beings that are equally dependent upon a healthy ecosystem. Chasing the mirage of unending growth threatens justice, peace and survival. Some have called this destruction a Third World War: a war involving the largest number of deaths and the largest number of soldiers without uniforms. It is a war waged by capital against people and life – but it is not inevitable and there are alternatives. Spiritual insights and ethics can point towards a way to break with such a system.

New economics

One approach is the development of a new economics: in the words of Schumacher “an economics as if people and the planet mattered”. He explored this approach and linked it to spiritual practices like Buddhism. It is now being developed by organisations like the New Economics Foundation (NEF).

In the New Economics wealth means well-being, and the measure of well-being includes an understanding of the inter-relatedness of humans in society and of societies in the wider ecosystem. The NEF developed a Happy Planet Index (HPI). This index of human well-being and environmental impact moves beyond crude ratings that are measured by GDP to produce a picture of the progress of nations based on the amount of the Earth’s resources they use and the length and happiness of people’s lives. (5) Similarly, an approach grounded in certain spiritual practices recognises real and material interconnectedness – it redirects our attention to the underlying economies of nature and sustenance, on which the market economy depends but tends to ignore.

As Vandana Shiva has pointed out: “Nature’s economy is the primary economy on which all others rest. Nature’s economy consists of the production of goods and services by nature – the water recycled and distributed through the hydrologic cycle, the soil fertility produced by micro-organisms, the plants fertilised by pollinators. Human production and creativity shrinks to insignificance in comparison with nature.” (6) Ecological security is our most basic security and ecological identities are our most basic identities.

The sustenance economy includes the work people do to directly provide the conditions necessary to maintain their lives – caring for each other, producing their own food and basic sustenance, and the sharing of common resources. It includes what can be termed ‘social capital’. This is the economy through which human production and reproduction is primarily possible. It is the economy of two thirds of humanity. Without the sustenance economy, there would be no market economy. (7)

In our current economic system there is excessive emphasis on the functioning of market economy as a representation of economic health. The precariousness created by this imbalance of attention on the market can be depicted as an equilateral triangle standing with a narrow point as its base. The broad top of the triangle represents the dominant focus on the market economy – the narrowing body of the triangle represents the sustenance economy that the market continually attempts to appropriate to itself (reducing all social relations into commodity relations). At the bottom tip of the triangle we find the virtually ignored natural economy: this is a disastrous instability.

A sustainable economic system recognises the interconnections and embeddedness of individuals in social relations and of humanity in a wider ecosystem – this can be depicted as a triangle turned the other way up. The broad base is the natural economy, its middle the sustenance economy that grows out of the natural economy, and its narrow upper point a much reduced market economy. The sustainable future that values life depends on economic thinking/practice undergoing such an inversion, and re-prioritising the natural and sustenance economies over the market.

What is work?

Just as the dominant economic system reduces the living earth to so many resources to be exploited, so it reduces human life to production and consumption. In modern economic theory the value of labour is production. By this limited logic people are turned into the commodity of labour from which profit can be extracted. Estranged from the direct fruits of their work, it is unsurprising that labour can often be experienced as a miserable and alienating necessity – even a form of enslavement.

A spiritual approach raises important objections to this process. From this perspective the primary value of action lies in its ethical consequences not economic productivity. Work is a context for ethical action through which humans can develop spiritually. (8) To be concerned solely with productivity, and then only as a gross term of valueless consumption can do great damage to basic human nature.

Productive work is necessary to acquire the basics for material subsistence. In Buddhism there is special attention to the ethical issues this involves in the idea of Right Livelihood – this is one of the eight limbs of the Eight-Fold Path, a fundamental teaching of the Buddha. Right Livelihood suggests that work should not be the cause of harm or exploitation of other living beings, nor should it encourage or support unethical activities. It should ideally be meaningful and supportive of spiritual growth. The practice of Right Livelihood offers a clear challenge to the contemporary system. It redefines work in relation to human dignity and meaning – returning it to the rich context of ethical and creative value. (9)

Consumerism v Simplicity

While Right Livelihood challenges the systemic devaluation of life in terms of production, renunciation and simplicity challenge its devaluation in terms of consumption. Whereas our current system takes consumption as an end in itself and tries to maximise it by optimal patterns of production, there are approaches that aim to maximise the well-being of all with the minimum of consumption.

Consumerism claims to offer a solution to suffering and meaninglessness: $600 billion a year ensures advertising invades every part of our public and private lives with messages promising a salvation through shopping. One in every six dollars in the US economy is spent on marketing. We are encouraged to construct our self-identity through consumption and locate the meaning of life in acquisition. But its promises are false (as most salvational promises prove themselves to be) – and its message is a gross distortion of reality, these mesmerising spells woven to stimulate greed and craving.

Consumerism strengthens the sense of an individualistic separate self-identity – self as consumer and epicentre of experience. It depends on the stimulation of desires that it cannot resolve: “needs” and “wants” become virtually synonymous. We end up worshipping possessions, having forgotten doctrines that speak of the freedom which comes from giving up possessions. As a contrast, Buddhism identifies the delusory sense of a separate self, along with the greed that accompanies that delusion, as root sources of suffering. It can make little peace with a system based upon fantasy and the multiplication of neurotic craving that lead to a tragic impoverishment of the human character.

The domination of market values like competition and hyper-individualism distort how we relate to the world. Challenging consumerism involves claiming back both the public sphere and our own minds from the clutches of market-determined values and messages.

Approaches that show simplicity in material terms can offer an adequate basis for deep personal satisfaction, as well as social and ecological justice. Voluntary simplicity has radical implications. When we see through the obfuscation of consumerism we begin to determine our own needs and wants, developing a sense of what really nourishes us based upon our own deeper experience, imagination, and creativity. It is an important act of self-determination against the colonisation of our minds – it is a breaking with the hypnotic impact of consumerism.

This practice of renunciation does not have to be understood as self-punishing sacrifice – rather as recognition of the freedom that comes from simple living. Rejecting excessive and neurotic consumption not only liberates us psychologically, it frees us materially from the oppression of the need to do yet more producing to meet ever multiplying 'needs'. It frees us to do meaningful work, creative work, to contribute to our communities, to find true wealth in human relationships.

To break the spell of consumerism we need to invest simplicity with meaning – a meaning that is deeper, truer and more powerful than the superficial messages that surround us. We need to celebrate simplicity as joyous and liberating: an affirming virtue that supports human dignity and creativity.

Contraction and Convergence

This discovery of the freedom of simplicity is going to be a key component in any equitable and just attempt to address the problems of climate change and unsustainability. At global level a useful model of economic transition to sustainability is called ‘Contraction and Convergence’. (10)

It is a set of projections that show sustainable levels of production and emissions are compatible with the raising of living standards for billions of people in the global South (if that is what they want). But it depends on a clear and planned contraction of production, consumption and emissions in the rich countries of the world. Rising production would meet the contracting production of the rich nations, to converge at a sustainable level achievable by re-localised and diverse economies. At present it is perhaps the only socially just strategy on offer – but it is almost impossible to get it on the table in discussions between rich nations. The assumption seems to be that any discussion of lowering economic prosperity is political suicide.

A spiritual approach has a lot to offer in supporting a social/political will which recognises that true well-being is compatible with levels of consumption much lower than those currently pursued by rich nations (the minority world). It is important we work to achieve wider recognition of this perspective. The options can be starkly presented: rejoiceful simplicity in a just world, or lifeboat authoritarianism and increased militarised protection of shrinking islands of prosperity.

Beyond this, Buddhism offers a deeper critique of consumerism. Any form of economic exchange that reduces life to a mere commodity value is fundamentally unethical. While ethical consumerism might put pressure on producers to amend their practices so as to cater for new markets, from another perspective ‘ethical consumerism’ becomes an oxymoron: the only ethical consumerism is actually the end of consumerism.

At the root of Buddhist/spiritual political economy is dana – this is generosity and the practice of cultivating generosity. (11) At the core of western political economy lies the idea of the individual and their property rights. Given that many spiritual approaches reject the idea of a reified self, this poses a major challenge to the very idea of private property.

The notion of private property is an extension of the conceit of self. It leads to the belief that increasing private acquisition offers a basis for security. But the drive for greater personal acquisition is tragically tied to erosion of the basic economies on which life depends – the ecological and sustenance economies. At the macro-economic level, the institution of private property leads to increased centralisation of economic power and diminishing of community – and damages the prospects for meaningful democracy.

Dana could be the fundamental principle around which economics are organised. As a basic virtue, generosity expresses a fundamental insight: namely that we are not separate entities but inhabit an intimate web of relationships with others and the world: it is orientation towards the other rather than fixation on the self. The extent to which we can let go of ego-centeredness is equal with our ability to open up to reality. Dana is a concrete expression of the dynamic of self-transcendence and it is central to the well-being of a community.

Common ownership

When applied to economics, dana suggests socio-economic forms which seem remarkably radical today: it leads to sharing and a wholly different relationship to property. The practice of common ownership has existed in spiritual communities for thousands of years. But the traditional two-tiered system of lay practitioners and monks created a dualistic ethic, which insulated the lay economy from these more radical arrangements. Perhaps we need to free this radical application of ethics from the ghetto of monasticism and extend them across the full range of social relationships. (12)

The property relations we currently take for granted are historically conditioned. They are socially constructed conventions, not some kind of inevitable or natural truth. In pre-capitalist and early non-hierarchical societies a range of customs and values influenced economic activity along very different lines. These included:

- the principle of the irreducible minimum – the shared notion that all members of the same community are entitled to the means of life, irrespective of the amount of work they perform;
- the principle of usufruct, whereby the means of life that were not being used by one group could be used, as needed, by another – including land, orchards, and tools. It points to a basis for making an important distinction between private property and personal property (personal property being the things we actually need to live);
- the principle of mutual aid – the sharing of things and labour whereby a family or person in difficulty could expect to be helped by others, and a recognition of the interdependence of each and every person within the community. These tendencies have been severely eroded by social forms of domination but they still remain essential to the vestiges of organic society that survive beneath the current disintegrating system.

These customs are suggestive of future forms of social organisation where sharing once more takes ethical precedence over individualistic acquisition – and where the sustenance economy once more predominates over the market economy.

Right now the common wealth of the ecosystem is enclosed and gathered under the control of private ownership. This enclosure of commons is a process that has been going on for centuries and has accelerated dramatically in recent years. Viewing the planet and its life support systems as resources to be acquired as private property leads to exclusion. The “ownership” of the rich depends on the “dispossession” of the poor. It robs diverse species and people of their share of ecological, economic and political space. Instead of earth based and life-based cultures of abundance, profit driven globalisation has created cultures of exclusion, dispossession, scarcity.

Corporate globalisation, intellectual property rights, patents on life are based on further enclosures – knowledge, culture, water, biodiversity, cells, genes and public services such as health and education. The rhetoric of “ownership society” turns everything into private property – with no intrinsic worth, no integrity, no subjecthood.

Influencing

The belief in ownership underlies the transfer of control of more and more of the earth's resources into the hands of corporations. It gives them the means to significantly influence the lives of all of us in ways that we cannot control by current democratic means. Meanwhile, the power to influence the global economy is increasingly appropriated to enormous and unaccountable institutions like the World Bank and World Trade Organisation.

Throughout the majority world people are repeating the experiences of the working classes of Europe during the Industrial Revolution. Economic forces are pushing them into extremely poor working conditions: where they are often without rights of organising and facing repression of resistance. One sixth of humanity is living in conditions that can be worse than those of the factory slums of the Industrial Revolution.

These inequalities were once justified by the idea of trickle down benefits but that delusion is no longer sustainable. Orthodox economics says that growth should lead to increasing income equality in and between countries – the widening inequalities in this world are enough to show that the economics of globalisation are not working.

The global economy is rigged against the world's poorest people. One-sided relationships, subsidised international corporations, a debt burden they have no control over – these are all part of the problem. For every dollar spent on aid by OECD countries like the United States and Western Europe, $10 is sent back by poor countries in debt repayments. As David Woodward of the NEF said "in the current system, the only way for poor people to get a little less poor is for rich people to get very much richer, wrecking the environment on which everything else depends."
For everyone to consume at the same rate as we do in the UK, we would need three planets to live on. It is clear the trickle down justifications of past are untenable – they are fantasies used to justify particular interests.

It is important to recognise that it is not an undifferentiated humanity that is to blame for ongoing environmental destruction – it is the power of capital following the logic of the market. This is a historically conditioned economic system: a system that perpetuates particular interests and brings benefits to a few at the expense of the many.

A more just and equitable world depends upon a vast re-extension of the common wealth. Dana as a basic economic principle implies a re-vitalisation of the idea of the commons. It makes no sense to speak of the commons without a shared influence over what is done with them. Dana points to a return of the natural resources (once considered a ‘common treasury’) into truly democratic control. Dana implies the creation of a culture of Earth Democracy – in which the actual needs of people, other species and the ecosystem have a stronger voice than capital and corporations. From the simple ethical value of giving come radical revolutionary demands.

Conclusion: Earth Democracy

We have been given a precious gift of human life – we have a responsibility to make the most of what we have been given. We have to recognise what is happening: that we are living in the midst of a war. It is a war being waged by corporations, capital and a bankrupt economic system against people and planet. This war is waged in the name of economic progress and increasing material wealth. But in the process what it means to be human is impoverished – the value of community and the natural world is being systematically destroyed.

They tell those of us who critically oppose this arrangement that we are dreamers. But the true dreamers are those who think this state of affairs can go on indefinitely just as it is. We are not dreamers: we are awakening from this dream that is becoming a nightmare. We are witnessing the current system destroying itself.

It sounds like a lot to do but then a journey of a thousand miles begins with finding our shoes. We need to remember that millions of people have been trying in a variety of ways to bring about a radical transformation of this society for hundreds of years. It's a vast and complex process that has included disasters and dead ends, but also a number of promising discoveries.

It's time we adapt to our economic and ecological circumstances – uncomfortable truths we have been avoiding for far too long. The Occupy protests are a reminder that with a little imagination, a lot can change. There are struggles to eliminate exploitative relationships and unjust distributions of power all over our world. In these struggles we need tools of wisdom and compassion.

We use wisdom, applying the insights of tradition to break through the current system's veneer of legitimacy. An application of ethics to current economics is an important step in revealing its basic assumptions as false, harmful and destructive – and can support a radical reformulation of economic relations. We work with compassion to build a movement based on solidarity – not in a war of one against another, but in the struggle of compassion against the injustices of global capitalism, against all forms of social domination and exploitation.

Today we need to oppose globalisation based on the movement of capital/ finance and the unnecessary movement of goods/services, with a globalisation based on wisdom and compassion. We need these tools in the struggle for Earth Democracy: this involves fully embracing our common, universal humanity, and our commonality with all life and other species through soil, water and air. Earth Democracy is based on valuing the intrinsic worth of all species, all peoples, all cultures; a just and equal sharing of this earth's vital resources; and participation in the decisions about the use of the earth's resources (at every level from the local to the global).

This is not a concept – it is being realised in the multiple and diverse practices of people reclaiming their commons, their resources, their livelihoods, their freedoms, their dignity. It involves the strengthening of local economies, the dynamic and forceful re-empowerment of local democratic institutions and the building of a strong global anti-capitalist movement.

This is demanding a fundamental change of our system. Yes we need to work through our individual capacity for greed, anger and confusion – that is our endless human task. Yes we need human beings who love this world. But we also have to stop cooperating with the system that breeds greed and confusion as it shapes our lives and our choices. From here anything is possible.

Compassionate participation in a global movement to reclaim democratic control over our food and water and our ecological survival is becoming a necessary project for our freedom. It involves creating a strong and diverse global movement that clearly says there are other ways of seeing this world.

Footnotes

1. See David Loy, 'The Religion of the Market'. http//:www.bpf.org/tsangha/
2. E.F.Schumacher, 'Small is Beautiful', 1973.
3. New Economics Foundation, 'Are You Happy?' Pdf down load, p42.
4. For a clear exposition of the irrationalities of a growth based system see 'The Limits to Growth: The 30 Year Update' – Meadows, Randers & Meadows, Earthscan, 2007.
5. www.neweconomics.org
6. Vandana Shiva, 'Earth Democracy', 2005, Zed Books and South End Press.
7. Often in traditional societies that are breaking down into mercantile and wage labour forms, the work of the sustenance economy is that sphere of work for which women hold the major responsibilities. The devaluation of this sphere can be linked to patriarchy – it is valuable to note the dynamic relationship that exists between one social form of domination and another.
8. The teaching of karma suggests that action needs to be ethically evaluated within the entire context in which it takes place. This includes the intention behind it, its impact on others, the nature of the act itself, as well as whether or not it achieves its ends. So, while the efficient productive value of work is not irrelevant, it must be balanced against the primarily ethical value of work.
9. The traditional formulation lists a number of livelihoods which should be avoided – primarily those that cause explicit harm such as trading in arms, living beings, intoxicants, or poisons; slaughtering, fishing, soldiering, deceit, treachery, soothsaying, and usury. These ethical considerations are easily extended to raise serious questions about the very basis of current economic activity which is often highly exploitative of other humans and beings, intoxicates through advertising and marketing and in which the manufacturing and trade in arms plays a large part, together with a whole system of finance rooted in speculation.
10. Contraction and Convergence is a proposed global framework for reducing greenhouse gas emissions to combat climate change. Conceived by the Global Commons Institute in the early 1990s, the Contraction and Convergence strategy consists of reducing overall emissions of greenhouse gases to a safe level (contraction), resulting from every country bringing its emissions per capita to a level which is equal for all countries.
11. In the words of Buddha: "If beings knew, as I know, the results of giving and sharing, they would not eat without having given, nor would the stain of selfishness overcome their minds. Even if it were their last bite, their last mouthful, they would not eat without having shared, if there were someone to receive their gift". (Itivuttaka 26).
12. In the early teachings we find the Buddha offering guidance to householders that recommend prudence and accumulation of wealth. But these must be considered in the light of the emergence of mercantilism at that time and the freedom it offered from traditionally limiting roles. History has moved on to reveal the irrationalities and limitations of that approach. We can now see the social and psychological price paid by the rise of mercantile economy, and so need to re-apply more basic principles in a new socio-economic situation. And we need to bear in mind that the monasteries often found ways to subvert ideals of common ownership. Over the centuries often they have weakened this radical proposal by becoming a kind of corporate entity that maintains a feudal relationship with the wider populace.

For the original version of this article, go to www.ecodharma.com ('Do Dakinis Wage Class War?' - http://www.ecodharma.com/influences-articles/ecodharma-articles/2009/03/04/do-dakinis-wage-class-war-buddhist-economics-and-earth-democracy) – many thanks to them for letting me chop and change their piece.
All comments/suggestions please contact me at Norman108@clara.co.uk.
For details on Occupy go to www.occupylsx.org.

Norman Blair
March 2012

This is a very short story by Margaret Attwood – if you are looking for novels about possible futures, I recommend her 'Year of the Flood' and 'Oryx and Crake'.

TIME CAPSULE FOUND ON THE DEAD PLANET

In the first age, we created gods. We carved them out of wood; there was still such a thing as wood, then. We forged them from shining metals and painted them on temple walls. They were gods of many kinds, and goddesses as well. Sometimes they were cruel and drank our blood, but also they gave us rain and sunshine, favourable winds, good harvests, fertile animals, many children. A million birds flew over us then, a million fish swim in our seas. Our gods had horns on their heads, or moons, or sealy fins, or the beaks of eagles. We called them All-Knowing, we called them Shining One. We knew we were not orphans. We smelled the earth and rolled in it; its juices ran down our chins.

In the second age we created money. This money was also made of shining metals. It had two faces: on one side was a severed head, that of a king or some other noteworthy person, on the other face was something else, something that would give us comfort: a bird, a fish, a fur-bearing animal. This was all that remained of our former gods. The money was small in size, and each of us would carry some of it with him every day, as close to the skin as possible. We could not eat this money, wear it or burn it for warmth; but as if by magic it could be changed into such things. The money was mysterious, and we were in awe of it. If you had enough of it, it was said, you would be able to fly.

In the third age, money became a god. It was all-powerful, and out of control. It began to talk. It began to create on its own. It created feasts and famines, songs of joy, lamentations. It created greed and hunger, which were its two faces. Towers of glass rose at its name, were destroyed and rose again. It began to eat things. It ate whole forests, croplands and the lives of children. It ate armies, ships and cities. No one could stop it. To have it was a sign of grace.
In the fourth age we created deserts. Our deserts were of several kinds, but they had one thing in common: nothing grew there. Some were made of cement, some were made of various poisons, some of baked earth. We made these

deserts from the desire for more money and from despair at the lack of it. Wars, plagues and famines visited us, but we did not stop in our industrious creation of deserts. At last all wells were poisoned, all rivers ran with filth, all seas were dead; there was no land left to grow food.

Some of our wise men turned to the contemplation of deserts. A stone in the sand in the setting sun could be very beautiful, they said. Deserts were tidy, because there were no weeds in them, nothing that crawled. Stay in the desert long enough, and you could apprehend the absolute. The number zero was holy. You who have come here from some distant world, to this dry lakeshore and this cairn, and to this cylinder of brass, in which on the last day of all our recorded days I place our final words:

Pray for us, who once, too, thought we could fly.