

Interview on  
**Buddhist Economics**  
with  
**Laszlo Zsolnai**  
Cambridge, England  
18th of November 2009

**Christian Egge: Laszlo Zsolnai, to start: You are teaching at several business schools. Then we have economists teaching economics at Economics Departments of universities. What is the distinction between these two ways of teaching?**

**Laszlo Zsolnai:** Well, the business schools are also part of universities, but business schools are a kind of *hybrid* of *academia* and *real life praxis*. This is why I have been teaching in different business schools during the last 25 years. In a business school setting you should be able to work with colleagues from other disciplines like psychology, sociology and so on. This is a more interesting than working with theory-driven (often rather dogmatic) economists. And in a business school you should interact with business people. But even more important is that your students are expecting that in a short time they will jump into the reality of business. So there are multiple feedbacks in a business school - which get the whole thing much closer to reality than what is the case in an economics department of a university. Some economic departments are very far from reality. They are self-centered ivory towers where some kinds of intellectual exercises are being done, but not very useful for the real world business.

I was studying economics and finance, but I left them as superficial and sterile fields. I like more interdisciplinary, praxis-oriented, closer-to-life things.

### Diagnosis of the financial crisis

**CE: We are facing many challenges in the world like climate change, environmental breakdowns, hunger and poverty. But we have also had the financial and economic crisis going on for about one and a half year now. If we would say that the prevailing economic system of the world is sick; what is your diagnosis? What is going on, what is the state of affairs?**

**LZ:** My understanding of the present economic and financial situation is that what is happening now, at least in the western world, in the USA and in Europe, is a drastic *downscaling*. It's a downscaling in terms of financial income and in terms of material and energy use - and impact on the environment. It's a radical and important downscaling of economic activities. For instance, the British economy has lost one year's GDP in the terms of depreciation of property and value loss of shares. This is a radical downscaling, a substantial reduction of the value of assets. We see similar things going on in Ireland, in Spain and in other countries.

In my understanding this could be beneficial for nature. Because the overall problem is that our economies are overgrown. They are too big in financial terms, but also in physical, material-energy terms. So we *should* cut back our activities drastically.

**CE: So somehow this crisis is good?**

LZ: It could be. If something is too big, overgrown, it should be reduced in size - and this process has already started. If we look at the ecological footprint or the general ecological impact of the economy, the problem is that the US or Norway are *beyond sustainable limits by 400-500%*! Which means that the present scale of the US economy or the Norwegian economy is roughly 4 or 5 times higher than it should be - taking the ecological capacity and limits of nature into account.

So the task of reduction is enormous! If you are 500% overshoot, to reach the sustainable level, you should reduce the size of your economy by 80%. So this requires a drastic reduction in energy consumption, material consumption. The Germans are clever enough that they explicitly formulate these goals in the major plan of what is called the *Sustainable Germany*. Germany should cut back its energy use by 80%! This is a way to go. These changes seem are unavoidable.

### The cure for the economic disease: frugality

**CE: So what will be a cure for the disease of this overgrowth - from the point of view of Buddhist economics – that is one of your main themes?**

LZ: Generally I will say that what we need is – Buddhist or not – a more *frugal way of life*, and a more frugal form of the economy. Frugality means reduced functioning in physical, material terms. In the US it's called *voluntary simplicity*. Frugality is a reduced, simplified way of activities in the material sense, with less use of natural resources. I can mention Buddhism here, but we have other traditions too. For example in Christianity we have the Franciscan tradition. It is extremely frugal, sometimes more frugal than the Buddhist one. The teaching of Francesco d'Assisi promotes a very simplified way of life. So in Christian tradition we have this frugality, but in almost all the world religions we can see it.

My point is that we need frugality, but there are many ways to approach frugality. One important way is Buddhism. But I wouldn't say this is the only one or that this is the most important one. For me Buddhist economics is the most promising, but I accept the other forms. The essence of frugality is the same everywhere: *Less is more!* This is a very practical thing. I developed for myself a simple rule that *usually 50% of something is enough!* My experience is that you can cut almost everything by 50%. So half is enough.

**CE: You mean that when you're eating or when you're cooking a meal, you reduce it with 50%?**

LZ: Yes, that's usually fine. In many respects we overuse almost everything. It can be very easily cut with 50%. Basically we get the same service or functioning - so 50% is almost as good as 100% of something. Also this is true in the case of finance or budgeting. You can do almost the same thing by half of the budget. Try 50% of budget, 50% of energy, 50 % of material use, whatever. Try 50%.

I'm a vegetarian, mostly for ethical and ecological reasons. By being a vegetarian you can cut by 90% of the energy or ecological impact of your food. So why not be a vegetarian - if you

can cut 90% of the overall ecological impact of your food and eating habit? For me that's rational. So all in all, what we need is frugality, because we are living in a world what ecological economist *Herman Daly* called *full-world economy*. This means that our economies occupy the fully the natural ecosystem. There is no space for more activities, we should live differently. A different way of life is frugality. Less is more. Buddhism is just one way to achieve this. This is my basic position in economics.

## Worldviews as backgrounds for a new lifestyle

**CE: Buddhism has a very clear outlook on man and man's position in the world; it's a world-view. One important part of it is the theory of "no-self", the thought that what we consider to be a stable, independent "I" or "ego" is just an illusion. And another is the doctrine of life as suffering – and then the path out of suffering. A means to reduce or overcome suffering is to conquer the "thirst" for life, to eliminate desires. All this belongs to the spirituality of Buddhism. Reduction of desires – and frugality – is here a natural thing. But for people without such a background – how is it to propagate "less is more" or frugality for them?**

LZ: Certainly some spiritual experience helps; I am not sure that without a spiritual orientation it is possible. Everybody knows that the central point of the teaching of the Buddha is that life is suffering. His major innovation was to analyze the *cause* of suffering. The Buddha offered a good suggestion, a very good strategy how to overcome *your own* suffering. That's a good recipe. But my concern is *the suffering of others*. Other people and other sentient beings also suffer, and their suffering is somehow caused by our way of life! *Our functioning, our life causes suffering of others*. We should do something about this.

Ethics enters into the picture here because we should do something about the suffering of other sentient beings. And their suffering is partly caused by our greedy behavior. Selfishness causes suffering for you, but this is your problem! If you want to suffer, just be selfish. But if your greedy behavior causes suffering and sometimes starvation or deaths of others, then you should not act as you wish. We should do something about this because it is an ethical problem. One should change his or her behavior for both purposes: reduce his or her own suffering *and* reduce the suffering of other beings. These two things are interrelated: reducing the suffering of others is also a way to stop the suffering of yourself while reducing your own suffering helps to reduce the suffering of others. The fantastic thing in the Buddha's suggestion is that overcoming your own self-centeredness or ego will reduce both your suffering and the suffering of others. There are some tradeoffs, but usually these two things come together. So helping yourself and reducing the suffering of others are convergent strategies. The major problem with today's business is that it wants to serve the self at the expense of the suffering of others. This is unacceptable.

Can a "New Economy" influence the prevailing mainstream system? Fight or cooperation?

**CE: David Korten – in his latest book "Agenda for a New Economy" – describes how in the "Wall Street kind of business and financial life" (the neoliberal capitalism which today is "mainstream"), the principle is to augment the desires, the so called "needs"**

**and to make the production bigger and bigger and bigger. How is it possible to have an impact on that kind of business or way of thinking? What you are propagating and teaching and trying to do? Does that have an effect on this kind of business or economics?**

LZ: There are many unacceptable, awful companies and financial institutions today. But even mainstream Wall Street or City bankers are clever enough and may change. There are relatively short term feed backs so they learn rather quickly. For me it is a surprise that the biggest banks and financial institutions in the US embraced and adopted the idea of some form of ethical finance. I expected this to take 15 years or so, but they did it much faster.

The idea is that in addition to financial criteria they should screen investment options, using social and environmental and ethical criteria. Using the so-called "equator principles" some branches of mainstream banks screen investment opportunities using nonfinancial criteria such as social, environmental and ethical ones. But *the problem is institutional*. If I had been in a position at Goldman Sachs or in a major bank in the City I wouldn't be able to change too much. Bankers are captured and in a sense misused by institutional structure. However, this is not an excuse for doing dirty things.

**CE: But we as human beings, as individuals, create the structures ourselves?**

LZ: The structures are more rigid than the people, and in a bad institutional structure you could not behave so ethically. But business is adaptive to changes because they want to make business one hundred years from now. So they will change, although there are major institutional obstacles.

My strategy is to help business students and practitioners to work with alternatives. Progressive businesses, alternative businesses. Not to cooperate with mainstream guys who are the problem but to develop an alternative business sector. That's promising.

**CE. Could you give a little description of features or characteristics of such progressive, alternative businesses?**

LZ: We are completing a new book on "Progressive Business". These businesses are smaller or medium size, some of them are big. But they have a *different motivation* first of all. They have a social function, a social goal. Of course they want to make money, they want to produce profit - but the profit in many cases are subordinated to social goals - or in some cases in equal importance to social goals. The main goal is not just to make money, but to provide really useful, valuable service for society.

For example in the US the legal profession is very high paid in the private sector, but surprisingly the best graduates from the top law schools (Harvard, Yale, Berkeley) go to work in the public sector. If you work as a public lawyer in the US you will have much less salary than a private lawyer! But the top guys go to the public sector, because there is a new ethos.

Working for a company what you get is not just money. You get at least two things: money and moral satisfaction. These two come together. Those young American lawyers who work for much lower salary want to be respected as persons representing worthy causes. The choice is between getting more money but less moral satisfaction or getting less money but more

moral satisfaction. So usually there is a tradeoff between the monetary and the moral attractiveness of a job. Dirty jobs, more money - noble jobs, less money.

**CE: What could be a “dirty job”?**

LZ: Everything that is morally, socially or environmentally unacceptable. This called "dirty job", this is called "dirty business". I prefer to work with alternative minded businesses and NGOs. Other professors, other colleagues are ready to work with mainstream or even dirty businesses. This is another strategy.

The whole debate about corporate social responsibility (CSR) reminds me to the debates during the communist time. At that time the question was what should we do with the communist system. What should we do? Collaborate with the communists and try to reform the system from within? Or not collaborate with them, and try to develop some alternatives because the whole system is not reformable and hopeless? My strategy was *not* to collaborate but to do something different. I don't trust in mainstream business. Mainstream business as we know it today will disappear. I cannot predict how, but nobody was able to predict the collapse of the Soviet Union either. Just suddenly it happened.

**CE: I think of Monsanto – the firm that earlier produced DDT and now is in the forefront with GMO (genetically manipulated organisms), seed monopolies and their whole programs with pesticides trying to make farmers all over the world dependent on them. I understand that your strategy will be not to cooperate with such a firm to try to reform it from within?**

LZ: With Monsanto I would say: follow Gandhi. No cooperation! I have a friend who worked as a lawyer in defending Monsanto against the Hungarian Government. We discussed this. "How can you work for Monsanto" I asked? He said, "In this special legal case Monsanto is right. And the Government is wrong. As a lawyer I should defend this company because in this local case there is some injustice; why not defend Monsanto?" I said, "I wouldn't do that". I do not believe that Monsanto can be reformed. Maybe you can improve some aspects of its functioning, but the whole core is rotten! You can't reform it just as you couldn't reform the communist system. If you can't reform something, you should do something else.

**CE: So you propagate organic farming instead?**

LZ: I propagate organic farming *and* fighting against unethical businesses! There are many ways, fighting via Green Peace for example against GMO.

There are huge differences in the ethical profiles of companies. Just like persons have different moral profiles, companies also have different faces, different moral profiles. Not all companies are equally bad. In the oil industry British Petrol or Shell or Exxon Mobile have different moral profiles. So companies are different, and just like with the different people we should interact differently with different companies. Some companies are hopeless and it is just waste of time to try reforming them. It's better to fight against them if needed.

## A change in consciousness? Who am "I"?

**CE: There is much talking about change of consciousness today when economics is concerned. It may have a spiritual background, or it may be based on other experiences like the IT-revolution, direct experience of environmental destruction and so on. Would you describe a little bit what is happening?**

LZ: This shift from a materialistic way of life towards a more spiritual way of life is really happening. Such a trend is positive but a problem is that sometimes this shift is not genuine and not deep enough. There are a lot of people who try to take it easy. The spiritual "take it easy" is something like plastic surgery. We can "fix" problems with a little Buddhism, a little anthropology and so on. This is dysfunctional.

Detachment is the key of the Buddhist path. For me detachment is the central point in any kind of spirituality. We can find some detachment practice in Christianity too. For example, the Jesuits have a good practice of detachment. They call it "the holy indifference". Not exactly the Buddhist kind of detachment, but comparable.

The concept of the "extended self" propagated in Deep Ecology by Arne Naess and others seems to me wrong. It's misleading. You can extend yourself via identification with others, with nature or even with the whole universe but your attachment is still there. So you may remain self-centered in this extended form. Your self can include the whole Norwegian mountains; but in the final analysis it is not a real solution. Ibsen was right in his Peer Gynt: *"To be oneself, the self must die."*

**CE: Rudolf Steiner, speaks of a substantial "I – consciousness": you have an "I" and I have an "I" and we are all separate so to speak although we are together. And although he also speaks about the individual "I" as to be found "in the periphery", in the other fellow(wo)men. At least his concept of the "I" seems to be very far from the Buddhist "no-self" theory. For Steiner the "I" is a spiritual, eternal fact.**

LZ: This is a very Western concept. Consider the Western concept of love, the prime example of which Romeo and Juliette. They loved each other so much that at the end they killed each other! They destroyed themselves. This over-generated, non-reflected love is not possible in Buddhism. So my point is: even if you love your partner, your father or mother or your children you should develop some distance from them and from your feeling toward them. You should have some detachment simply because you can lose them. They may die – tomorrow! And if you are so attached, uncritically attached, then you can really loose. But if you have some detachment, you are able to love your significant persons even stronger! The same applies to your own self.

If you are so attached to a business or a country or a person you can be quite easily corrupted. You will be ready to do some awful things just to keep your position or your money or whatever. So: distance! Step back. Remember *Socrates*. The basic position is that I am ready to die because I am not ready to make this kind of a corrupt act. This is the other side of detachment: I am ready to die, I am ready to leave everybody and everything because I am not a slave of myself. I am detached. This attitude liberates you. So detachment is a step towards liberation. Without liberation we cannot achieve a really frugal or ecological or peaceful life.

## Detachment and frugality – something for young people?

**CE: I see what you mean, but is it possible to introduce this insight, this perspective to young people and in relation to economics?**

LZ: Yes, my experience is very encouraging. Everybody is interested in *liberation*. Liberation is important, this is an everyday experience, the need for liberating yourself from something. It can happen in many ways. Everybody has an idea what is the meaning of being liberated - from things, persons, or institutions.

Buddhism has a positive reputation in the West. Liberation is really a need, that's the basic insight of the Buddha. People are really suffering, and they understand that it would be nice to have a little bit more distance from suffering. Health is important for everyone of us. There is a well documented body of research which shows that materialistic self-centeredness leads to unhappiness and illness. So mainstream Western economics is a fine recipe to destroy your health and happiness.

There is strong connection between doing dirty things and health. You do something and there will be some consequences also on you. If you do some bad things, there will be bad consequences, but this is also the Karma. So if you are awful guy, you will suffer in a concrete somatic bodily form. So if you want to do that, just go to Wall Street and you will die sooner. If you want a peaceful and more enjoyable life, try something different. Try detachment! Give off some of your money! This is a good exercise because it can liberate you. My family is not very rich, but we are rich enough. We lose a considerable amount of money every year because of not allocating or saving in the most rational way. I don't mind.

**CE: I have an example from Sweden – somewhat in the other direction: one should be active concerning one's pension and choose between different funds to augment it. I never did anything, and I also can't take an interest in it, and I find it terrible that people shall be forced to do that for their own pensions. We are forced into greed and raw capitalism; this is "rational" and "natural" and "positive"; "everybody shall be capitalists, all workers on the stock market"(!)**

**But the ironic thing is that those who never did anything about these things (during a certain period), they have gained now! Because those who really tried to manipulate and to buy and sell and choose new funds and go away from funds actively, they have lost because of the financial crisis.**

LZ: Sometimes doing nothing is the best thing. It's also in the Chinese Taoist tradition that *inaction* ("wu-wei") is *sometimes the most active thing*.

Without detachment we cannot get closer to liberation and also we cannot get closer to the badly needed frugal or "less is more" way of life. We cannot serve nature and ourselves in the way that we incorporate everything into our own self. It's better to step back and to say that I am nothing. I don't want to emphasize myself, and I don't want to destroy the air, the sea, the animals – because I am not so important. At a higher level you can be very important, but

just because you consider yourself as not important. So this is paradoxical. And the tragedy of the west is that we try to avoid this kind of paradoxes.

The western mind does not like paradoxes. Socrates was one of the few western thinkers who acknowledged paradoxes. He stated that he knows only one thing that he does not know anything. The paradoxes are at the heart of the human existence and we should live by paradoxes. In the east it is almost trivial, but in the west we like to deny paradoxes because we want to manipulate and control things, engineering the world.

### Practical examples of Buddhist economics: Gross National Happiness

**CE: I haven't known much about Buddhist economy till now. I have heard about E. F. Schumacher (Small is Beautiful) earlier, but I didn't really go into it. It is a whole movement actually. I know that people from Schumacher College and Schumacher Society have helped starting the "New Economics Foundation" and other organizations. You have the knowledge of the theory of Buddhist economy. What practical things are being done? Can you tell about businesses that are run based on this inspiration?**

LZ: The most famous macro level thing that became popular in the West is the *Gross National Happiness* project of Bhutan. "Happiness economics" is today one of the most attractive research streams in the West. Millions of dollars are spent on economics of happiness.

**CE: What does it mean?**

LZ: Psychologists and economists are working together studying the relationship between income and happiness. In the US, in England and in the other western countries the economy in terms of GDP has doubled during the last 20 to 30 years. But the general level of happiness remains the same! This finding is very robust, and now we can say for sure that up to a certain limit money can buy happiness, but beyond that limit it cannot.

This limit is very important. Money is important for increasing happiness up to 15000 – 20000 dollars/person in GDP. Beyond this level, one cannot expect the increase of happiness by further economic growth. So it's not wise to encourage economic growth beyond certain level because it is not beneficial for society but destructive for nature.

The whole thing started in the Kingdom of Bhutan in the Himalayas in the 1990s. The King realized that the western economic measures are not appropriate for Bhutan which is a small, homogeneous Buddhist country. Bhutan needs something different in order to measure the wellbeing of the people. The King invited scholars to develop something different from GDP. They developed what today is called Gross National Happiness (GNH).

This is an alternative economic measure which consist of several important indicators of the general level of wellbeing and happiness of a nation. Using income related data, health data, data on education, and data of cultural investments; it's a multidimensional measure. The Bhutanese experiment and the related development policy is getting more and more recognition in the west! So, in macroeconomics this is the most famous example how a Buddhist approach in economics might work. To replace the misleading, one dimensional

GDP with a multidimensional and more balanced measure of socio-economic development. That's fascinating.

According to its GDP Bhutan is very poor. The USA is 25 times more developed than Bhutan from the economic growth perspective. But Bhutan is more developed in many respects if we take a multidimensional perspective. Today the richest countries, the so-called OECD countries started to develop a new measure of well-being (Gross National Wellbeing) which is inspired by the little, underdeveloped Bhutan.

Now, *at the micro level*, there are different stories. In California, in Oregon and in Washington you can see interesting initiatives of sustainable businesses. There are a lot of people in business who are motivated by Buddhist or Buddhist-like ideas, or other alternative worldviews. We can call them "*value-entrepreneurs*" or alternative entrepreneurs. Some of them are close to Buddhism, some are inspired by other spiritual worldviews, but what they are doing is consistent with frugality and sustainability I was speaking about.

You can live like a Buddhist without being a Buddhist. If you give up using a car altogether for example. We did it 15 years ago. We lived in California without a car. It is possible. It was not a big sacrifice because neither my wife nor I myself liked to drive. It was not a negative thing for us. Before that we used our car not more than 2000 kilometers in a year. I travel a lot, and I can live everywhere without having a car. If you do this, this is Buddhist economics, or frugal economics or simplicity or whatever.

The second thing is: if you become vegetarian, this is a major achievement. It's a Buddhist way of life. If you decide not to use medicines for example, that's another major step towards a frugal way of life. There are a lot of practical steps which are consistent with the Buddhist principles. So we should not be dogmatic, everybody can be a Buddhist in his or her own way! The crucial thing is the detachment; you should be detached from everything, even from the Buddha himself! You should also be free from the wish to attain Nirvana otherwise you'll never ever get to Nirvana. Nirvana is the cessation of desires and you should not desire the cessation of desire.

Buddhism can be very creative. We should not say that this or that *enterprise is completely a Buddhist enterprise* – but we can do a lot of things in business which is close to the Buddhist practice. You remember J. F. Kennedy's famous speech in Berlin: "*I am a Berliner*". We are Buddhists – all of us. To a certain degree. The question is: how can we realize our Buddha nature. How can we develop this and make into practice?

**CE: As you mentioned, I was in Bellingham outside Seattle, and I visited an organization called SustainableConnections. They have lots of networks in that region, Whatcom County, and then they have networks all over USA - like BALLE (=Business Alliance for Local Living Economy). They are focusing on local food, local enterprises and locally owned enterprises. All the members are businesses owned by visible persons. No absentee owners. They are working a lot with organic agriculture and green houses and all these things. Would you mention businesses or enterprises or networks that are working explicitly so to speak inspired by the Schumacher Impulse or what you call Buddhist economy? I understand it when you say that many things are Buddhist without being Buddhist... but can you still mention positive businesses or banks or networks or things that are now being creative in the world for the future.**

LZ: We don't have extensive knowledge on that, but some colleagues are doing empirical research on that in California, in Thailand and elsewhere. In Europe one of the most promising and successful new kinds of business in banking is the so called "ethical banks". One of them is the *Triodos Bank* in Holland and Belgium – they also work in England. The Belgian founder is *Frans de Clerk*. He is a person who is influenced by Rudolf Steiner and also by eastern philosophy. Triodos is a great example, but it's not a Buddhist bank.

Another prime example of alternative business is the *Co-operative Bank* in Britain. It's a big network, and you can visit the website of the Co-operative Bank. The original cooperative is 150 years old, but it has transformed itself into a major alternative business. They have a vision of business beyond banking; they have branches or networks of businesses in retailing, in construction work and so on.

In Italy, Coop Italia is an extremely successful alternative business. They are going beyond the triple bottom line. Coop Italia is the biggest retailer in Italy. It dominates the Italian food market with the 35% of the total turnover in this sector. More than one hundred thousand people are working in Coop Italia, and it is one of the most advanced companies in the world concerning ecology.

It seems that the Buddhist economics in the West is living more in an anonymous way. The phenomenon called "anonymous Christians" are well-known. It refers to those people who are living like Christians without being Christians. We have *anonymous Buddhist people and organizations*. So for me it would be enough if one cut his or her use of energy, material and money by 50%. This kind of downshifting is crucial. So this kind of anonymous Buddhism is my hope.

You are much more creative if you do not have too much. What we need is what is "enough". If you have what is enough, you can be free. If you have more than enough, you can be a slave of your unnecessary possession. If you have less than enough, you are also a slave, the slave of poverty. We need just what we really need. I reject a lot of invitations, a lot of projects, a lot of opportunities to earn money because I am not interested in making money more than I really need.

### Economics, health and spirituality

**CE: B. Alan Wallace, whom I interviewed in my former book, said that Buddhism can be a mediator between science and religion and between many things because itself it doesn't want to expand, it does not want to propagate itself to gain adherents.**

LZ: Exactly, it can be a mediator among different religions because it is the only religion that is not a religion at all... So that's why it's so attractive for many people in the West. Some very high level businesspeople got interested in Buddhism without any rational explanation. For example a former president of the National Bank of Hungary made a break and went to Bhutan for some months or so. He said: *this is what I need*. Spiritual experiences or spiritual influences – nobody can escape from it, because *we are spiritual beings*. You can try to deny this, but sooner or later you will find out: you need spirituality.

You can try to deny the spiritual aspect of your life, but you will suffer and you will destroy your health. Medical research provide evidences that if you suppress this spiritual dimension of yourself this is very negative to your health and life expectancy. There will be consequences. A lot of businesspeople realize that after doing many years in the "rat race" of business then their health is too bad. Experiencing some deep crisis, losing a partner or a child or a parent; these kind of "spiritual emergencies" can change even hard core businesspeople.

**CE: So an economy based on a spiritual view of man will be good for the individual – as well as for the public health so to speak?**

LZ: Absolutely. The real question is *health or wealth*. You want to be healthy or wealthy? You can try to be rich or you can try to live just a healthy life. Too much richness is destructive for your health as well as too little richness. Public health is a good concept, because health is not a private thing. Your health is related to the health of your fellow-beings and the health of the environment. Health is really public.

## Future perspectives and ethics

**CE: What are your perspectives on our future?**

LZ: Your ethicality could not depend on the prospect of the future. My personal expectation is that in the next 25-50 years we will have a very dark, destructive, hostile world. A lot of wars, a lot of problems, economic conflicts so, a very dark age will come. But even in this very bad case we should remain human. This is my point. And the Buddhist approach is fruitful to remain human in very hard circumstances. Consider the stories of the imprisoned Tibetan monks in China. If you believe that your self is not so important, if your self doesn't exist in a real sense, you can survive torture and such things.

So I'm not optimistic about the future. As a professor and as a scholar I don't want to participate in the lying culture of today's mainstream business which propagates that "we are working for sustainable development" while actually destroying the world. We should stop lying about business and its impact on society and nature.

**CE: But you are working to inspire young people to become businessmen who want to make a sustainable business in a sustainable world?**

LZ: Yes, but the first thing is that we should stop lying about mainstream business because it's disorienting people. "Do different things" that's my advice. Future managers should do something different. I try to inspire future leaders to serve their communities in a meaningful way.

**CE: Where – or under what circumstances – do you see hope – or a "possible future"?**

We need a new kind of dream. In Europe the promising places are *Barcelona, Milan* and other creative cities or regions which combine their historical heritage with eco-technologies and art and culture. *Bhutan* can embrace some new technologies in a creative way. The ecological footprint of Bhutan is 50% lower than the sustainable level. It means that they have a 50% saving in ecological impact. So they have ecological capacity to use. Another good example is

*Costa Rica*. They are 60 % of the ecological limits, and one of the most happy people on earth. Good weather, good culture, more than one third of the whole country transformed into nature reserve.

An important thing in Buddhism is that it promotes a basically *individual strategy*. Buddhism is individualistic in a good sense. I should not wait for you and others for my spiritual transformation. I can do it myself, I am not dependent on you doing this. I can be the only Buddhist economist or only Buddhist entrepreneur on earth. The main thing is that one does something for himself or herself and for others in a liberating, deeply ethical way. That's it.