

# Building a Mindful Economy

Foundations for an Applied Buddhist  
Inspired Business Ethic



1

Mindful Business International Series

Based on experiences from  
the Network for Mindful Business

 **NETZWERK  
ACHTSAME  
WIRTSCHAFT**

May all beings be happy and free.

Kai Romhardt and the Business Ethics working group

“Building a Mindful Economy:

Foundations for an Applied Buddhist-Inspired Business Ethic”

Original title: “Achtsam Wirtschaften als Weg:

Grundlagen einer angewandten, buddhistisch inspirierten Wirtschaftsethik”

First published in German in 2015

Translated into English by Christine Welter in 2020

© 2020 Netzwerk Achtsame Wirtschaft e.V.

Berlin, Germany

Creative Commons license granted for non-commercial use with attributions  
and no derivatives (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)





# Introduction

Buddhism and the economy, how do these two things go hand in hand? More and more people in the West feel drawn to Buddhist ideas and practices. This also applies to the economy. The theme of “mindfulness” is making headlines in leadership circles and many companies use meditation exercises to train their employees to improve mental fitness and the ability to resist stress.

Buddhist teachings and practices, however, go far beyond the different forms of self optimization. They offer us a deep process of understanding and possible change which is not only beneficial to ourselves but to all living beings. Buddhism aims to overcome any unnecessary suffering in order to recognize different paths that will reliably lead us toward more happiness, freedom, contentment and love. Ethical behavior maintains a key role throughout this process.

Our current style of managing the economy creates many problems—some are visible, some invisible. On a daily basis we witness how humans, relationships, communities and our environment are being destroyed by misdirected economic concepts and actions. We might see the results of these misguided actions in the form of wide-spread burn-out or in factories on the other side of the world which remain invisible to us.

Our mindfulness practice has made us aware of how deeply every single person’s life is permeated by economic processes, economic thoughts and actions. The economization of our everyday lives has increased rapidly over the course of the last decade. We work, consume, buy and sell, invest and are exposed to the economic actions of third parties. This may happen in the form of advertisements, taxes, products, prices and wages. We cannot remove ourselves from this economic equation, even if we do not pursue a classic career in economics or finance. We can, however, forge our own path to a certain extent and we can create new paths together with others.



# Invitation

The Network for Mindful Business collected many central insights of Buddhist teachings and mindfulness practitioners. We created a first set of approaches towards a Buddhist inspired economic ethics. Ethics or 'sila' is one of the pillars of Buddhist teachings and practices. This text was written relying on basic Buddhist teachings and our personal experiences as actors within the economy who practice meditation. This is a (universal) invitation to search for new concepts regarding our daily economic thinking and actions. We want to show alternatives to the current economic system of our time.

This is an invitation to read and contemplate these principles on a regular basis and also to engage in an exchange about them with our friends. In this way our understanding of business and of our economic behaviors will deepen. We will be able to intercept many misunderstandings and potential difficulties and change the economic field with mindful deeds and beneficial energy.

Our goal is to gradually develop and expand this publication in the respective fields of experience and to expand it by adding different areas of the economy.



## What Does Mindfulness Mean (To Us)?

In Buddhism mindfulness is described as “the royal state of mind” for good reason. Mindfulness is the key to self-awareness and also the key to happiness. Mindfulness anchors our attention in the present moment and allows us to see what is happening. In a state of deep mindfulness we can watch what we are thinking without identifying with our thoughts. We can properly identify our emotional state and better understand the signals our body is sending to us. The deeper our mindfulness gets, the more clearly we see the reciprocal relationship between the body and the mind, between inner and outer impulses. We understand the effects our actions have on both ourselves and on others. We accept responsibility for our thoughts, words and deeds, because we understand the effects of those actions upon

ourselves and others. We realize that we are connected to everything in a myriad of ways. We neither exist nor act outside of the lives of others. And finally, we understand that we hurt ourselves when we hurt others. This immediate insight inevitably leads us down the natural path of ethical action.

Mindfulness can be practiced in a number of reliable ways. By pausing on a regular basis and connecting with our breath, we truly connect with ourselves. We can incorporate this same alertness into all our activities—be it while eating, walking or speaking. By reawakening these daily activities, they can provide us with joy and insight. When we reconnect with the different areas in our life one step at a time, we can let go of our dualistic ways of thinking and acting, which separate us from fully living our lives. Our current economic system created the spirit of divisiveness and separation between us, which we experience as destructive, unkind and meaningless on many levels. As we nourish and train our mindfulness, we gain a completely new idea of current economic interactions and how they could potentially change. We regard the cultivation of mindfulness as an absolutely vital ‘medicine’ for our human existence and as a compass guiding our economic actions. People who practice mindfulness encourage compassion, peace and understanding in their daily surroundings in a multitude of ways. They gradually create structures that are less harmful to themselves, their fellow human beings and the earth.

The current economic system suffers on many levels. It fosters discontent, fear and separation instead of leading us as individuals and as a community to develop greater well being, contentment and happiness. Mindfulness helps us understand the sources of this fatal development and recognize individual as well as collective alternatives to the current model. These alternatives do exist. There are no neutral economic laws nor are there economic laws without alternatives. Business people have always made and continue to make ethical value decisions. Every single sustainable and deeply understood process starts with an individual and is therefore individual and personal in nature.



# Basic and Guiding Principles of Mindful Management

- A Buddhist inspired business ethic is an offer to examine previously held economic beliefs and to question deeper seated spiritual and economic principles of operation. It is not a teaching and certainly no dogma one should fight for and defend with all one's strength.
- Our existing economic schools of thought and theories do not come without alternatives. They are social constructs, invented and developed by human beings. In essence they are an expression of collective values and formed by what we perceive as normal. There are a plethora of economic theories and ideologies portraying themselves as irrevocable truths, be it for instance the belief in material growth as a universal panacea and "the freedom of the markets." Many economic ideas, however, have a much more subtle effect and shape our view of the world. One of them is the permanent invitation to compare ourselves with others. Ideas and theories which lead to viewing human beings as resources are based on a negative conception of human nature. In essence these ideas are based on separation and opposition. They need to be reviewed and revised. All business people are called upon to acknowledge insights and experiences of alternative economic models to the current ones instead of adhering to conventional and familiar views.
- The economy does not "happen" outside of our lives nor is it removed from our own human values and virtues. The same ethical values apply in the business sector as in the private sector and vice versa. The separation between economy and non-economy leads to problems. When this unity is restored and experienced, responsibility, meaning, joy, care and love for one's own actions grows. We may witness a new atmosphere of understanding, compassion and non-violence in human interactions and our interactions with the earth. It is important that no other laws and values apply in the economy than in the rest of society.
- Greed, impatience, discontent and aggression are very common in economic actions in our time—at their core, these emotions are harmful mental poisons. We must stop tolerating and idealizing them as profitable driving qualities and instead must understand their harmful effects, roots and causes. Only then can we work towards changing these emotions. It is so important to

cultivate patience, frugality, content, generosity and understanding. These are the qualities that should govern our lives and daily work routines.

- Mindful management is really about meaningful economic activities and creating values, which are not based on speculation and financial bets.
- It is crucial that business transactions contribute to shifting suffering towards compassion, peace and joy. Economy and business are not an end in themselves. Economic activities are not value neutral either, but require a focus on meaningful goals and an ethical foundation.
- Overriding objectives for all economic activities are the increase of true happiness, the creation, furthering and production of meaning as well as the alleviation of suffering.
- The economy needs to serve its people instead of enslaving them. The worship of fight and competition leaves us with few winners and many losers. A mindful economy serves all human beings and supports their self-development and self-awareness.
- Economic growth without spirituality, mental growth and an ethical foundation is incomplete and susceptible to misfortune. Material or financial growth is no panacea. It is limited in scope and effect and has wide spanning negative side effects. Spiritual growth is in many ways unlimited and a central key to the satisfaction of true human needs.
- Economic terms and measures such as growth, competition, efficiency, return on investment, one-upmanship and performance are often idealized and seen as universal remedies for a “healthy economy”. These ideas are the basis and justification for a number of unwholesome actions, which can lead us down the wrong path. It is important to renew the central economic standards and concepts, to fill them with new content and to align them with meaningful and holistic goals. The goal of economic activity should not be the achievement of abstract economic target figures such as growth, full-time employment or the attractiveness of a certain location, but rather the development of the well-being of the members of our society. Traditional criteria for measuring wealth are often insufficient and need to be complemented by new indicators.

- We feed into discontent, envy and anger when we stay focused on that which we do not own or things we do not have. With mindfulness we can connect to the existing conditions of happiness in the present moment. When we let go of what we believe to be missing, we can truly appreciate and value that which is already existing. Appreciation and gratitude for those things that already uplift our lives are a key to happiness.
- Our idea that happiness is waiting for us in a distant future may lead us to constantly sacrifice the present moment for a distant happiness that may never come. This takes meaning away from our current actions. They become simply a means to an end. When we understand that the step we take in this moment is our life and that we can take it happily, we may relax and refrain from imagining our happiness tucked away in an uncertain future. We realize that we already live in a world of fullness, which we can only access in the present moment. Every person must reach this insight for him- or herself. It will revolutionize our view of our own lives and our economic actions. Instead of waiting for happiness or equating happiness with external successes we will hopefully start to explore, discover and touch sources of happiness every day. Happiness isn't a succession of coincidences, successes or hard work, it is a state of mind which we are able to cultivate.



## Image of Humanity

- Human beings are social creatures by nature and long for connection, understanding, peace and love. We need to understand the causes of our selfish, greedy and materialistic tendencies or behaviors and patiently transform them. This is our way forward. Hurtful, harmful and divisive acts have a high inner price and will always fall back on the initiating actor. By recognizing and acknowledging these connections we will act increasingly more kind, more peacefully and exist in harmony with our environment. We will operate in concert with our true self and get to know our free and radiant selves step by step.
- The human mind has the tendency to feel unfulfilled and seek happiness and fulfillment outside of itself. This desire cannot be satisfied by reaching wealth, fame or influence. It is much more helpful and less risky to touch and secure one's inner riches. Our ideal is a content human being, at peace with her- or himself, cognizant of his personal measure and aware that

he wants to invest in his spiritual growth. He knows that material growth cannot satisfy his longing.

- External comparisons easily lead to superiority, inferiority or equality complexes. Instead of comparing ourselves incessantly it is much more important to understand ourselves deeply, to recognize our true needs and reach inner contentment.
- As mature, inwardly free people, citizens and consumers, we will create an economy different from the one we have today. We are the economy. We create our economy with our individual economic choices day by day. When we commit to the path of appreciation and correct balance, we can let go of false promises and apparent economic constraints and norms. We can then create wholesome alternatives to the status quo.
- Poverty and social injustice bring forth hatred and anger. They can produce a vicious circle of negative thoughts and activities. The drastic income and wealth inequalities in our time need to be alleviated as we gain generosity and insight on a new path.
- In traditional Buddhist experience happiness is rooted mainly in spiritual riches like contentment, inner stability, freedom and compassion. The accumulation of wealth in the areas of money, power, social prestige and sensuous pleasures is fleeting and unsustainable.
- It is not wise to keep raising one's standard of living far and ever further beyond basic human needs and essentials. We need to learn how to access the resources and possibilities already available to us and live happily in the present moment.
- More desire and greed will lead to more suffering. Many problems in our daily lives arise from desire and greed. If we tame our desire, we will be able to relax and let go of entanglements.
- Sharing our time, energy and material possessions without expecting anything in return is a source of happiness. He or she who gives without expectations and tactical considerations and is also capable of accepting gifts without feeling guilty, will be rewarded with unconditional joy.



# Mindful Work

- If our work is primarily characterized by compassion and appreciation, it will benefit both ourselves and others on a deeper level. A livelihood, however, that harms nature or other people also makes us and our fellow human beings unhappy. It is wise to understand our current work situation clearly. It neither helps to sugarcoat it nor presenting it without alternatives. It is necessary to make use of our freedom to carry positive and meaningful ideas into the world through our creative power.
- Our body and our mind are strongly influenced by our work environment. By training our mind and practicing mindfulness we can help increase compassion, connection and respect for each other. With this mindset we can change our work environment step by step. It is important to choose a wholesome work environment, as long as this falls within the scope of our possibilities. In a positive environment we will be able to develop courage and determination.
- Our daily work routine will change for the better when we learn to listen more attentively to our coworkers without judging or reacting. When we learn to recognize and set aside aggressive, fearsome, manipulating and disrespectful communication styles, we can connect more deeply with our environment.
- In cooperation with employees, colleagues, superiors and other economic actors, it is conducive to speak honestly and respectfully and not to exaggerate, cover up or manipulate. We do not want to remain silent when a difficult conversation is necessary. Even if our comfort, our position or our prestige is at risk, we encourage ourselves to express what is necessary.
- It is especially important to practice pausing at regular intervals during our everyday work routines. The cultivation of mindful work methods such as impulse distance, a beginner's mind, deep concentration while keeping all inner commentary at bay, disidentification and leisure helps us to go through the day more clearly and consciously.
- Being aware that we have developed unwholesome habit energies and destructive beliefs in the field of work, we strive to understand these forces more deeply in order to acknowledge and patiently transform them.

- Acting out of aversion, anger, greed, envy and sexual desire creates many problems in our work environment. It is helpful to train and educate ourselves in mindfulness in order to learn to take care of these difficult emotions and to recognize their true causes.



## Mindful Handling of Money and Property

- In the end, money will not make us happy, even if it seems to make our life easier. It is therefore not expedient for us to focus our lives on wealth, profit, fame, or on the fulfillment of desires. Most desires are essentially infinite, and even if we satisfy them temporarily, we can only quench our thirst for a short time. They can't be a compass for true and lasting happiness.
- True happiness is rooted in peace, strength, freedom and compassion. The origin and source of true happiness lies in a lifestyle that gives us peace, serenity and inner freedom. So many joys in life like community, satisfaction and connection to nature know no financial price. We experience an inner revolution when we see that what we thirst for most is to be obtained through spiritual training rather than through material means.
- Sharing our time, energy and material resources generously and with open hands results in many positive effects within ourselves and externally. When we support people in need our heart opens and our actions directly bring us joy.
- The property of others must be respected. And at the same time it is crucial to prevent others from enriching themselves by exploiting human suffering and the suffering of other beings or from gaining advantages at the expense of others.
- It makes sense to clarify the negative consequences in both open dialogue and also in political discourse from the possibility and strategic goal of accumulating unlimited wealth. What are the obligations of property owners and what kind of property restrictions make sense? There are many forms of theft, unjustified appropriation and exploitation, and it is high time to recognize them and free ourselves from them.

- Investments in companies or financial stocks that are made purely for the sake of returns separate us from the world and often cause damage. It is important to support activities, projects and companies that contribute to the true happiness of all beings and to the common good. These enterprises are more meaningful and often beneficial for those involved. We don't want to support companies that mistreat or harm their employees, customers, suppliers or the environment. Not just through our investment decisions but also in our roles as consumers, workers and entrepreneurs. These are ways we can exert our influence. By increasingly refraining from investing in anonymous products, processes, people and companies, we take responsibility for the impact of our investments in the world. When we establish personal contact with companies or people we can understand more deeply whether or not we want to support their actions with our money. This is one way we will gradually make sure that our decisions as investors, consumers and employers will not contribute to companies and processes which cause harm in the world.
- Money is not an end in itself but can serve as a healing energy to promote and realize meaningful projects, business ideas and enterprises that satisfy real human needs with their services and products in a healthy way.



## Mindful Consumption

- A lot of harmful foods are offered, sold and consumed in our society. A conscious and mindful diet that nourishes rather than harms body and mind is therefore of great importance. The consequences of unmindful consumption are showcased everywhere in our society and have many negative effects: dullness, obesity and the inability to enjoy food are just some examples. Advertisements constantly try to influence our consumer behavior. Mindfulness can work as a protective shield helping us differentiate wholesome from unwholesome consumer impulses to maintain our bodily and mental health.
- We can distinguish between material and spiritual consumption. During material consumption we consume physical objects (eating, drinking, stimulants). With mental consumption we absorb thoughts, ideas, theories or certain sensory perceptions (sounds, forms, smells, touches, tastes). When we let mindfulness watch while we are consuming, we realize how material and spiritual consumption can cause either suffering and harm or wellness and healing. This happens within ourselves and in our environment.

- Mindful eating, drinking and consuming are critical to a physically and spiritually healthy society. Negative consequences of careless consumption are immense. The suffering caused by different kinds of addictions is extremely high. Our society would benefit tremendously if we could refrain from or at least reduce the consumption of alcohol, drugs and other intoxicants.
- We seek refuge in consumption because we can not escape our loneliness, our fears and our stressors. We know that our problems will not go away when we give in to consumer impulses. Consumption makes many untenable promises. Instead of losing ourselves in mindless consumption, we would be better off addressing our real needs and problems. We need to understand these on a deeper level. Careless consumption intensifies feelings of separation, guilt and shame and creates additional ambiguity and distraction. Seeking refuge in ultimately infinite consumer offers, temptations and distractions leads us astray and will not alleviate inner emptiness.
- When we cultivate mindfulness, we also sensitize ourselves to the effects of alcohol, drugs, betting, prostitution and gambling. Then we can recognize these effects more clearly in our lives and actions. We can explore how we want to deal with these consumer goods and potential sources of suffering. We can see more clearly which products, websites, electronic games, TV programs, films, magazines, books and conversations influence us in a negative or in a positive way. In which way do these products influence our mind and our actions shortterm and longterm? We can see the danger that the seed of violence and anger gets activated and strengthened within us when we consume certain media offerings. Mindfulness can be our compass, which shows us how to change our consumer behavior in order to avoid harming human beings and the environment. This is for the good of society and ourselves.
- Our current economic system is designed for material growth and the pursuit of ‚more and more‘ seems normal and an expression of human nature. This strategy of growth however neither makes sense individually or collectively. As long as we cultivate an attitude of “never enough”, we live with a constant sense of lack. We easily overlook the abundance that already exists in our lives. Economic theories, advertising and marketing stimulate this feeling of lack often directly. There is never enough and we are never enough. This mindset makes it difficult for us to find the right balance and stay in balance.

- As human beings we need a right measure. We will veer off the path when external comparisons and apparent normalities determine what it is we truly want. We must examine our true needs. The right measure can never be found when we compare with others. When we recognize that our mind is constantly grasping and reaching for new things, we welcome the benefits of self-restraint. Self-restraint will come with added freedoms.



## Mindful Selling

- Being aware that we are still far from achieving trusting relationships and mutual appreciation in the fields of buying and selling, we do want to look at these economic processes in a new way in the hope of changing them for the better. The goal is to build a mindful sales culture, where the separation between seller and buyer interests no longer exists.
- Best case scenario we sell an outstanding product which we have used and tested ourselves and which therefore lives up to its promises. We sell this product to a buyer who truly needs it for a fair price. This happens without any psychological tricks. The whole process is steeped in the spirit of connection and joy. Both buyer and seller are aware that something meaningful or wholesome enters the world.
- Buyers and sellers find it equally difficult that sales and marketing rely so heavily on methods of deception, manipulation, seduction and psychological tricks. Methods like the artificial creation of urgency or the sexualization of products won't satisfy any person's true needs and will always separate one side from the other.
- We spend a lot of energy on packaging and branding for products, persons and companies in our economic system. This is a tremendous waste of resources which can also misguide us individually and collectively.
- Advertisement is by no means ineffective or harmless, but enters our mind and influences it—sometimes intensely, sometimes subtly. If we manage our intake of advertisements mindfully, we recognize the negative effects of advertising and other marketing measures on our mind. It seems that we still lack the terms, but it seems appropriate to speak of a conscious “attack on the mind”. Therefore we embrace the idea of reducing and restricting

harmful, manipulative advertisements. The human spirit is easily vulnerable and deserves protection like our bodies. We shouldn't expose our mind unprotected to the messages of advertising professionals. Nor should we allow that our public spaces and the internet are dominated by the interests of advertisers. Mindfulness helps us to see the harmful effects of advertising and the value systems behind it more clearly. With this clarity we better understand economic actions and decision making.

- The targeted stimulation and exploitation of feelings such as fear, anger, envy, jealousy, pride, dissatisfaction and insecurity—whether in advertising or in sales efforts—should be referred to by its true name and described as an intentional mental violation. This could be seen as the first step for a necessary sensitization. The mass distribution of advertising messages that serve similar purposes can be seen as the pollution of our minds. It is time to create a greater awareness of the different forms of mental violations and mental environmental pollution. Then we will be able to strengthen the spirit—similarly to the body—to protect it from being polluted.

## Network for Mindful Business

The Network for Mindful Business (Netzwerk Achtsame Wirtschaft) is a buddhist-inspired community connecting German-speaking dharma practitioners since 2004.

The German word “Wirtschaft” is broader than “business”. We are interested in exchanging ideas about how to engage more mindfully in our daily economic activities. We’re not just managers. We are employees, entrepreneurs, free-lancers and the unemployed. We work in business consulting, teaching, tech, social work, healthcare and a wide variety of other sectors. We all create our economy together.

We were founded by friends in the Plum Village Dhyana Zen tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh and cherish these roots, but we see ourselves as broadly Buddhist and we are open to the insights of other contemplative traditions.

In 2014 we established ourselves as a non-profit charity under German law. Our goal is to promote mindfulness, compassion, understanding and wisdom. In 2020 we published our first English-language materials and started opening our circle beyond the borders of Austria, Germany and Switzerland.

We organize regional groups, opportunities for contemplation and exchange, co-working days, lectures, retreats, working groups and seminars. We connect and inspire people who wish to put buddhist-inspired practices We see our activities as seeds of awakening in the vast field of business and in the economy.

## Contact

Email: [international@achtsame-wirtschaft.de](mailto:international@achtsame-wirtschaft.de)  
<http://network-mindful-business.org>  
Netzwerk Achtsame Wirtschaft e. V.  
c/o Dr. Kai Romhardt  
Am Großen Wannsee 68  
D-14109 Berlin

## Donations

Netzwerk Achtsame Wirtschaft e. V.  
GLS Bank  
BIC: GENODEM1GLS  
IBAN: DE97 4306 0967 1171 9651 00

