

PRINCIPLES OF GIFT ECONOMICS

at the East Bay Meditation Center in Oakland, California
by David Foecke

We can see ourselves as ambassadors explaining the gift economy model. Let's talk to our East Bay Meditation Center community about how what we are doing is different. We're a beacon for teachings of liberation where no one is excluded by the economic model. This has potential far-reaching implications.

EBMC is, to quote E.F. Schumacher, "a viable future visible in the present."

Five Principles of Gift Economics at the East Bay Meditation Center are:

1. No prices and no fees
2. Everyone has the opportunity to give
3. Giving occurs in response to need
4. Giving is invited in proportion to one's capacity
5. There are feedback loops that show whether the need has been met

Principle 1: No prices and no fees

In gift economics, there are no prices and no fees. Goods or services are offered to others out of generosity, not "in exchange" for anything. The offering is "uni-directional."

Alternatively, in a market economic system, goods or services are only offered as part of an exchange, or trade, usually for money, with the terms of the exchange often defined by a price or fee. The transaction is "bi-directional." (Barter systems are a variant of market economies, since they also involve exchange.)

One implication is that in gift economics, there is no economic barrier to receiving the goods or services offered. (In market economics, anyone who can't pay the price, even on a sliding scale, or doesn't have something to barter, is excluded.)

For the East Bay Meditation Center, this means that no one is excluded from receiving the teachings, which has been a key factor in our becoming, according to some, the most diverse meditation center in the country.

East Bay Meditation Center is an “all-Dana” center (Dana being a Pali word meaning “generous giving”). We operate using gift economics, with the awareness that in some Buddhist systems, it is said that the teachings of the Dharma, since they have the potential to help people free themselves from suffering, are priceless. It is impossible, therefore, to assign a price to the teachings, which would only limit access to them if they were only offered as part of an exchange with those who can afford a fee.

Principle 2: Universal voluntary giving -- everyone has the opportunity to give

In gift economics, just as no one is excluded from the opportunity to be a recipient of gifts of goods or services, everyone is also provided an opportunity to offer gifts to others in the system. These are also offered out of generosity, on a purely voluntary basis. Participants can choose when and how to give, and no one is ever excluded based on the size of their gift, or whether they give anything at all.

At the East Bay Meditation Center, this means that all practitioners are offered an opportunity to offer gifts of money to the teachers from whom they have received teachings, and to offer gifts of money or volunteer time to the Center itself. Some describe this as a “pay it forward” type model, where one’s generous giving allows the recipient to continue to offer their own gifts freely and joyously.

An ancient example of this system, going 2,600 years back to the time of the Buddha, can be found in Theravada Asian Buddhism, where monks offer teachings in monasteries to anyone, for no fee, and then go on alms rounds to collect food for their meals, stopping at every dwelling, so that all laypeople have the opportunity to make an offering.

A gift economy promotes transformational relationships. Generous giving opens the heart, and allows people’s lives to touch one another joyfully -- generous giving is a creative act that transforms both the one who gives and the one who receives.

Principle 3: Giving occurs in response to need

In a mature gift economy, participants offer gifts in response to the perceived needs of the recipients. Therefore, the “operating system” itself simultaneously stimulates, and is fueled by, motivations of generosity.

At the East Bay Meditation Center, practitioners are invited to offer gifts to meet the need of the teachers to make a living, and the need of the Center itself to be sustainable. And since the practice of generosity and generous giving is a core practice in the teachings of the Buddha and other wisdom teachers, gift economics and Dharma practices go hand-in-hand!

In the market economic system, you don't give until you know you'll get something back in exchange. Coupled with advertising that invites "comparison shopping," the "operating system" itself simultaneously stimulates, and is fueled by acquisitiveness and greed, encouraging one to "give as little as possible, in order to get as much as possible."

Some are referring to gift economics as "gift ecology" because of the way the parts of the whole respond to one another in an organic, self-balancing, and life-supporting way. When goods and services are offered generously in response to needs, the operating system itself encourages the examination of what one really needs, and "how much is enough." Therefore, what emerges(*) with gift economics is a system that moves towards "enoughness," i.e., equilibrium and balance.

In a purely market economic system, where the dominant message is to "give as little as possible, in order to get as much as possible," the system promotes the message that "more is always better." What emerges(*), in this case, is a property of "never enough," i.e., a system locked in unlimited growth.

Principle 4: Giving is invited in proportion to one's capacity

In a mature gift economy, people with greater financial and other resources voluntarily choose to give more.

This is in contrast to market economics, where the tendency is for everyone to be charged the same price for goods or services (with minor exceptions in the form of discounts, sliding scales, etc.).

This is a crucial principle for the successful operation of a mature gift economy, since the lack of economic barriers means that a gift economic community will include a higher proportion of individuals who have a lower capacity to give, than a community of people who are all able to pay a given "price."

At the East Bay Meditation Center, this principle is reflected in the fact that the "recommended giving spectrums" that are posted show recommended gifts that increase with income level.

Given our collective conditioning in our culture's currently dominant market economy, this principle may be one of the most challenging to successfully implement.

When we are surrounded by hundreds of market economic messages every day to "get as much as you can in exchange for as little as possible," it can be challenging to truly give in proportion to one's capacity. This is likely especially true for those who have higher than average capacity, because truly giving in proportion to one's capacity might mean giving more than the set "price" one might be charged in a market economic system.

This is one reason why participating in a gift economy is "swimming against the stream." It's a big stretch: how is it that people who can afford to give more than what would be a set price in the market system can be inspired to give more? How can people who can give more come to see that their role is to give more to make a gift economic community sustainable?

Principle 5: There are feedback loops

In a mature gift economy, "feedback loops" exist to offer givers feedback as to when needs have been met. It helps to answer the important question, "How do we know when we've given enough?"

In the simple example of the Thai Buddhist monk going on alms rounds for food, for example, the laypersons who are offering food can look into the begging bowl when it is held out, and can see how full it is. That's a simple feedback loop. In organizations like the East Bay Meditation Center, feedback loops may take the form of "thermometer" images and "recommended giving level" charts.

Because of the level of conditioning in market economics in our society, our average gift will often be less than what is needed. Most of us haven't had a lot of practice "exercising the muscle" of interacting with one another on a gift economics basis. We might still be operating from our unconscious conditioning as a "consumer," trying to get the most product for the lowest price -- in other words, a *transactional exchange-based relationship* between me and the East Bay Meditation Center.

But when we gain a mature understanding of gift economics and the practice of Dana, we readily experience giving as a *transformational relationship* -- an opportunity that honors and cultivates our ability to

generously support our community, that decreases clinging and greed, and that inspires us toward spiritual awakening!

Sharing this information with others

Gift economics is different than fundraising. There is no “them” that is being asked to give to “us.” A gift economics paradigm is one where a community learns to support each other through generosity, a “we” that is powerful, resourceful, empowering and abundant.

Those of us at the East Bay Meditation Center who are sharing this information with fellow community members (e.g., through giving “Dana talks”) are essentially *gift economics educators*. And, zooming even further out, we are *pioneers* in a social transformation starting to take place through gift economic experiments all over the world, with the East Bay Meditation Center as one bright light.

These thoughts are offered by David Foecke not as a final treatise, but rather as a starting point for stimulating reflection, conversation, dialogue, and further research. David has been both a small-business owner and investor in the market economic world, as well as a founder, Board member, or staff member of several nonprofit organizations. He functioned in a volunteer Executive-Director-equivalent role on the Leadership Sangha (Board of Directors) during the seven years (2005-2012) of the East Bay Meditation Center’s “start-up” phase.

() The use of the word “emerge” in the above text refers to a phenomenon described in systems theory as “emergence,” whereby systems come to exhibit “system-wide” properties that are not evident in the smaller components that make up the system. One classic example is a colony of ants. Individual ants in a trail do not “know” the route between their colony and a food source. Each ant is following and contributing to chemical clues laid down in specific patterns by each of the ants on the trail. The chemical clues are all that each ant “knows.” But, by each ant following the same rules, the colony, as a full colony, “knows” the route to the food source. The “knowledge” is at the level of the full colony, and is considered an “emergent property” of the “system” that is the ant colony. One source of more information about emergence can be found on wikipedia:*

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emergence>. July 2014.