



## Is greed good?

**C**H'AN PRIEST HENG SURE probably doesn't fit the image that most of you think of when you hear the words "Buddhist monk." A Caucasian native of Maine, Sure is steeped in the high-tech culture at the Uni-

versity of California—Berkeley, where he obtained his master's degree and near where he now lives and works. He regularly lectures at UC Berkeley and other Silicon Valley universities, such as Stanford, and he can speak at length on complex technological topics. He has participated in panel discussions at the International Solid State Circuits and Embedded Systems conferences.

During the question-and-answer session at the end of a recent talk in Sacramento, someone asked Sure about Buddhism's stance on gene splicing and cloning. His answer expanded beyond these two topics to a more general discussion on the impact of technology on society. Our decisions impact humanity and the broader ecosystem in which we live in an increasingly pervasive way, and this impact occurs with increasing rapidity. That pervasiveness and rapidity are increasingly outpacing both the significance we attach to our decisions and the time we take in making them.

He's worried that short-term financial gain is the primary motivation for our decisions and that we pay little or no regard to their long-term potential consequences. As an example, he related a recent conversation he had with an electrical engineer. "Marketing tells me what to build," the engineer told him. The financial planners, who balance each feature's incremental cost against its incremental revenue potential, tell marketing what to build. I'm cranking out newer generations of products faster and faster in a perpetual attempt to upgrade customers, again to generate more rev-

enue. I ship those products with known bugs, because there's no time to fix them. Then, as a consumer, I'm constantly bombarded by advertising messages urging me to buy these and other products 'for the economy.' When I get them home, they're, of course, full of bugs, and I eventually give up and throw them in the closet. This is not why I became an engineer."

At first glance, Sure's words may seem too pessimistic. But are they? My wife and I are grappling with a nontechnologically related equivalent situation. A large conglomerate

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recently bought out our neighborhood veterinary clinic, and we almost immediately noticed a shift in customer service and in the care our pets were receiving. Sessions with the veterinarians are rushed now, and they recommend expensive, invasive procedures and more costly medications than they used to. Do they want to act this way? Probably not; echoing the engineer's words, this is probably not why they became veterinarians. But to keep their jobs, they need to answer to their new owners' investors, who want to see revenue and profit graphs that are constantly tracking upward.

Do you see yourself in the engineer's words? Is it increasingly all about the money? If so, forget about PCs, cell phones, and DVD players.

What happens when someone decides they've figured out how to clone a human being; when Moore's Law trends invariably deliver processing power and storage that surpass the human brain; or when, with human-genome sequencing complete, our ability to tinker with our DNA accelerates? Will we pause, consider the ramifications of what we're about to pursue, and decide whether we should, just because we could? Or will we plunge ahead, regardless of the consequences, to appease the shareholders? Don't just think about what someone might do in your country or in your culture. Remember: One person's actions can now spread more widely, more quickly, than ever before.

Michael Douglas' Oscar-winning character Gordon Gecko, in the 1987 movie *Wall Street*, uttered the

memorable line "Greed is good." We all like to talk about how the '80s were the years of greed and, by implication, how much more enlightened we are nowadays. Sorry, folks, but the more recent, money-grabbing dot.com frenzy, whose aftereffects we've been dealing with these past few years, has me believing that the decade of the '80s wasn't an anomaly. Greed isn't good, I'm firmly convinced (although I confess to imperfect implementation of that belief, especially after the December Christmas-shopping season), but I'm afraid that I'm increasingly in the minority. And I'm afraid for what this trend means to the future of our species and of our world. I welcome your thoughts. □

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