

## Democratic Conception of State and Law in Buddhist Society with Special Reference to Political and Social Philosophy

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### Abstract

The practice of politics has been closely interwoven with other activities in social and political institutions. Buddhist social philosophy, in brief, presented a systematic and functional framework for fashioning a pattern of social relations that was clearly attuned to the needs and demands of the new social milieu, especially the political culture of the rising 'new middle class' at the time of the Buddha. In these circumstances, the Buddha sought to restrain the growing spirit of individualism characteristic of this social climate by proposing a more ethical and humane way of characterizing the place of the individual in society. This, among other considerations, included a concern for others and acceptance of difference, as for instance, in the positive attitudes to social differentiation of 'race' or caste. This way of thinking was also reflected in the Buddhist attitudes towards other religions which showed a greater willingness to accept other faiths. Confronted with the religious pluralism of the times, the Buddha readily acknowledged 'every form of [rival religious beliefs] as a possessor of some degree of Truth'. As a consequence, the ideals of democracy manifest in Buddhist social and political philosophy were seen as the best form of governance to the extent that it generated 'principles of statecraft [denoting] a democratic welfare state, mainly embodied in terms of a specific understanding of kingship. Contrary to the prevailing idea of a divinely ordained monarch, the idea of a king as a chosen leader, it was argued, has arisen historically as a social contract. Accordingly the people by mutual agreement selected one person as the 'the king' in the hope that he could be relied on to maintain law and order, and social harmony.

**KEYWORDS:** Buddhism, Democracy, State, Law, Society.

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### Introduction:

Buddhism is best characterized as a metaphysical/philosophical or a religio-philosophical system which presents a total view of the world and man's place in it, including a prescription for the ordering of human affairs. However, in considering the socio-cultural dimensions of Buddhism, we need to acknowledge that from its earliest days of origin in India, Buddhism has proved to be remarkably flexible and adaptable to different social and geographical environments. Historically, this 'tolerance and liberality of its thought' (Pratt 1928 quoted in Jayatilleke 1967) accounts in part for the three Great Traditions of Buddhism or Schools'<sup>1</sup>—*Theravada*, *Mahayana* and *Vajrayana*. It is perhaps nowhere better evident than in the present day with the emergence of New Buddhism and 'Western Buddhism' (Batchelor 1994; Brazier 1999), as well as the Dalit Buddhist movement (*Navayana*) in India inspired by Ambedkar,

following the mass conversion of Hindu untouchables in 1956 (Omvedt 2005). Of the three Schools or Traditions of Buddhism, *Theravada*, the oldest of these is associated with Early Buddhism. The modes of practice of this tradition give primacy to self-transformation and emphasise the practice.

### **Buddhism and the new global society:**

Buddhism is a pragmatic teaching which starts from certain fundamental propositions about how we experience the world and how we act in it. It teaches that it is possible to transcend this sorrow-laden world of our experience and is concerned first and last with ways of achieving that transcendence. What finally leads to such transcendence is what we call Wisdom. The enormous literature of Buddhism is not a literature of revelation and authority. Instead, it uses ethics and meditation, philosophy and science, art and poetry to point a Way to this Wisdom. Similarly, Buddhist writing on social action, unlike secular writings, makes finite proposals which must ultimately refer to this Wisdom, but which also are arguable in terms of our common experience.

In the East, Buddhism developed different schools of "traditions," serving the experiences of different cultures, ranging from Sri Lanka through Tibet and Mongolia to Japan. Buddhism may thus appear variously as sublime humanism, magical mysticism, poetic paradox and much else. These modes of expression, however, all converge upon the fundamental teaching, the "perennial Buddhism." This pamphlet is based upon the latter, drawing upon the different oriental traditions to present the teachings in an attempt to relate them to our modern industrial society.

In the past two hundred years society in the West has undergone a more fundamental transformation than at any period since Neolithic times, whether in terms of technology or the world of ideas. And now in the East while this complex revolution is undercutting traditional Buddhism, it is also stimulating oriental Buddhism; and in the West it is creating problems and perceptions to which Buddhism seems particularly relevant. Throughout its history Buddhism has been successfully reinterpreted in accordance with different cultures, whilst at the same time preserving its inner truths. Thus has Buddhism spread and survived. The historic task of Buddhists in both East and West in the twenty-first century is to interpret perennial Buddhism in terms of the needs of industrial man and woman in the social conditions of their time, and to demonstrate its acute and urgent relevance to the ills of that society. To this great and difficult enterprise Buddhists will bring their traditional boldness and humility. For certainly this is no time for clinging to dogma and defensiveness.

### **Political action of Buddhist Philosophy and the conversion of Political Power:**

Political power may manifest and sustain social and economic structures which breed both material deprivation and spiritual degradation for millions of men and women. In many parts of the world it oppresses a wide range of social groupings — national and racial minorities, women, the poor, homosexuals, liberal dissidents, and religious groups. Ultimately, political power finds its most terrible expression in war, which reaches now to the possibility of global annihilation.

For both the oppressors and the oppressed, whether in social strife or embattled nations, karmic delusion is deepened. Each group or nation emphasizes its differences,

distinguishing them from its opponents; each projects its own short-comings upon them, makes them the repository of all evil, and rallies round its own vivid illusions and blood-warming hates. Allied with an ideology, hate in any form will not depart tomorrow or next year. Crowned with delusive idealism, it is an awesome and murderous folly. And even when victory is achieved, the victors are still more deeply poisoned by the hate that carried them to victory. Both the revolution and the counter-revolution consume their own children. Buddhism's "Three Fires" of delusion (*moha*), hatred and ill-will (*dosa*), and greed and grasping, (*lobha*), surely burn nowhere more fiercely.

Contrariwise, political power may be used to fashion and sustain a society whose citizens are free to live in dignity and harmony and mutual respect, free of the degradation of poverty and war. In such a society of good heart *all* men and women find encouragement and support in making, if they will, the best use of their human condition in the practice of wisdom and compassion. This is the land of good karma — not the end of human suffering, but the beginning of the end, the bodhisattva-land, the social embodiment of sila.

This is not to be confused with the belief common among the socially and politically oppressed that if power could be seized (commonly by elite, then personal, individual, "ideological" change will inevitably follow. This absolutely deterministic view of conditioning (which Marx called "vulgar Marxism"), is as one-sided as the idea of a society of "individuals" each struggling with only his own personal karma in a private bubble hermetically sealed off from history and from other people.

Political action thus involves the Buddhist ideal of approaching each situation without prejudice but with deserved circumspection in questions of power and conflict, social oppression and social justice. These social and political conflicts are the great public samsaric driving energies of our life to which an individual responds with both aggression and self-repression. The Buddha Dharma offers the possibility of transmuting the energies of the individual into Wisdom and Compassion. At the very least, in faith and with good heart, a start can be made.

Buddhists are thus concerned with political action, first, in the direct relief of non-volitionally caused suffering now and in the future, and, secondly, with the creation of social karmic conditions favorable to the following of the Way that leads to the cessation also of volitionally-caused suffering, the creation of a society of a kind which tends to the ripening of wisdom and compassion rather than the withering of them. In the third place, political action, turbulent and ambiguous, is perhaps the most potent of the "action meditations."

It is perhaps because of this potency that some Buddhist organizations ban political discussion of any kind, even at a scholarly level, and especially any discussion of social action. There are circumstances in which this may be a sound policy. Some organizations and some individuals may not wish to handle such an emotionally powerful experience which may prove to be divisive and stir up bad feeling which cannot be worked upon in any positive way. This division would particularly tend to apply to "party politics." On the other hand, such a discussion may give an incomparable opportunity to work through conflict to a shared wisdom. Different circumstances suggest different "skillful means," but a dogmatic policy of total exclusion is likely to be ultimately unhelpful.

Effective social action on any but the smallest scale will soon involve the Buddhist in situations of power and conflict, of "political" power. It may be the power of office in a Buddhist organization. It may be the unsought for leadership of an action group protesting against the closing of an old people's day care center. It may be the organizing of a fund-raising movement to build a Buddhist hospice for care of the dying. It may be membership of a local government council with substantial welfare funds. It may be joining an illegal dissident group. In all these cases the Buddhist takes the tiger — his own tiger — by the tail. Some of the above tigers are bigger than others, but all are just as fierce. Hence a Buddhist must be mindful of the strong animal smell of political power and be able to contain and convert the valuable energy which power calls up. A sharp cutting edge is given into his hands. Its use we must explore in the sections which follow.

### **The good political society**

The social order to which Buddhist social action is ultimately directed must be one that minimizes non-volitionally caused suffering, whether in mind or body, and which also offers encouraging conditions for its citizens to see more clearly into their true nature and overcome their karmic inheritance. The Buddhist way is, with its compassion, its equanimity, its tolerance, its concern for self-reliance and individual responsibility, the most promising of all the models for the New Society which are an on offer.

What is needed are political and economic relations and a technology which will:

- (a) Help people to overcome ego-centeredness, through co-operation with others, in place of either subordination and exploitation or the consequent sense of "righteous" struggle against all things.
- (b) Offer to each a freedom which is conditional only upon the freedom and dignity of others, so that individuals may develop a self-reliant responsibility rather than being the conditioned animals of institutions and ideologies.

The emphasis should be on the un-dogmatic acceptance of a diversity of tolerably compatible material and mental "ways," whether of individuals or of whole communities. There are no short cuts to utopia, whether by "social engineering" or theocracy. The good society towards which we should aim should simply provide a means, an environment, in which different "ways," appropriate to different kinds of people, may be cultivated in mutual tolerance and understanding. A prescriptive commonwealth of saints is totally alien to Buddhism.

- (c) The good society will concern itself primarily with the material and social conditions for personal growth, and only secondarily and dependently with material production. It is noteworthy that the 14th Dalai Lama, on his visit to the West in 1973, saw "nothing wrong with material progress provided man takes precedence over progress. In fact it has been my firm belief that in order to solve human problems in all their dimensions we must be able to combine and harmonize external material progress with inner mental development." The Dalai Lama contrasted the "many problems like poverty and disease, lack of education" in the East with the West, in which "the living standard is remarkably high, which is very important, very good." Yet he notes that despite these achievements there is "mental unrest," pollution, overcrowding, and other problems. "Our very life itself is a paradox, contradictory in many senses; whenever you have too much of one thing you have problems created by that. You always have extremes and therefore it is

important to try and find the middle way, to balance the two" (Dalai Lama, 1976, pp. 10, 14, 29).

(d) E.F. Schumacher has concisely expressed the essence of Buddhist economics as follows:

"While the materialist is mainly interested in goods, the Buddhist is mainly interested in liberation. But Buddhism is 'The Middle Way' and therefore in no way antagonistic to physical well-being... The keynote of Buddhist economics is simplicity and non-violence. From an economist's point of view, the marvel of the Buddhist way of life is the utter rationality of its pattern—amazingly small means leading to extraordinarily satisfying results" (Schumacher, 1973, p. 52).

Schumacher then outlines a "Buddhist economics" in which production would be based on a middle range technology yielding on the one hand an adequate range of material goods (and no more), and on the other a harmony with the natural environment and its resources.

The above principles suggest some kind of diverse and politically decentralized society, with co-operative management and ownership of productive wealth. It would be conceived on a human scale, whether in terms of size and complexity of organization or of environmental planning, and would use modern technology selectively rather than being used by it in the service of selfish interests. In Schumacher's words, "It is a question of finding the right path of development, the Middle Way, between materialist heedlessness and traditionalist immobility, in short, of finding 'Right Livelihood.'"

### **Organizing social action in Buddhist Society:**

A systematic review of the different kinds of Buddhist organization for social action which have appeared in different parts of the world is beyond the scope of this pamphlet. Some considerable research would be required, and the results would merit at least a separate pamphlet.

Later we shall introduce three contrasting movements which are in some sense or others examples of Buddhist social action. Each is related more or less strongly to the particular social culture in which it originated, and all should therefore be studied as illustrative examples-in-context and not necessarily as export models for other countries. They are, however, very suggestive, and two of the three have spread beyond their country of origin.

### **A. Maintaining balance**

Social action needs to be organized and practiced in such a way as to build upon its potential for spiritual practice and to guard against its seductions. Collective labor with fellow-Buddhists raises creative energy, encourages positive attitudes and engenders a strong spirit of fellowship. The conflicts, disagreements, obstacles, and discouragements which will certainly be met along the way offer rich meditation experiences and opportunity for personal growth, so long as scrupulous mindfulness is sustained.

In our view, the first social action of the isolated Buddhist is not to withhold the Dharma from the community in which he or she lives. However modest one's own understanding of the Dharma, there is always some first step that can be taken and something to be

learned from taking that step. Even two or three can be a greater light to one another, and many forms of help are often available from outside such as working together through a correspondence course, for example, or listening to borrowed audiocassettes.

### **B. Spiritual centers: example and outreach**

In this section we are concerned with the significance of Buddhist residential communities both as manifestations and examples of the "good society" and as centers of social outreach (mainly, though not solely, in the form of teaching the Dharma). We may distinguish four possible kinds of activity here.

In the *first* place, any healthy spiritual community does, by its very existence, offer to the world a living example not only of the Good Life but also of the Good Society.

In the *second* place, where the members of such a community undertake work as a community economically ("Right Livelihood"), then to that extent the community becomes a more realistic microcosm of what has to be done in the wider world and a more realistic model and example of how it might best be done.

*Thirdly*, such communities are commonly teaching and training communities. This may be so in formal terms, in that they offer classes and short courses and also longer periods of training in residence, in which the trainees become veritable community members.

*Fourthly*, the community might involve itself in various kinds of outside community service, development or action beyond that of teaching, and beyond the necessarily commercial services which may sustain the community's "Right Livelihood."

### **C. Community services and development**

We refer in this section to the fourth aspect distinguished early in the previous section, namely, various possible kinds of service and support which may be given by organized Buddhists to the local community in which they live. Arguably if this kind of work is undertaken at all, it might more likely be initiated by a non-residential "lay" Buddhist group, whose members as householders and local workers may have strong roots in their town or neighborhood.

The main material support for the movement comes from the villagers themselves, although financial and material assistance has also been received from overseas.

### **D. Political action and mass movements**

Although there may be exceptional circumstances in certain countries, as a general rule there are strong arguments against Buddhist groups explicitly aligning themselves with any political party. It is not just that to do so would be irrelevantly divisive. There are deeper, underlying social and political realities which cross-cut the conventional political spectrum of left, right and center.

Nevertheless, Buddhism, like other great religious systems, inevitably has political implications. To some extent these seem to be relatively clear, and in other senses they are arguable and controversial. Religion has its own contribution to make to politics and, ultimately, it is the only contribution to politics that really matters. It has failed both politically and as religion it falls either into the extreme of being debased by politics or of rejecting any kind of political involvement as a kind of fearful taboo. The fear of creating

dissension among fellow Buddhists is understandable, but if Buddhists cannot handle conflict in a positive and creative way, then who can?

### **E. Universal Responsibility and the Good Heart**

Elsewhere we have already quoted the words of the Dalai Lama emphasizing the active global responsibility of Buddhists, and the importance above all of what he calls "Universal Responsibility and the Good Heart." In all countries will be found non-Buddhists, whether religionists or humanists, who share with us a non-violent, non-dogmatic and non-sectarian approach to community and world problems, and with whom Buddhists can work in close cooperation and with mutual respect. This is part of the "Good Heart" to which the Dalai Lama refers. "I believe that the embracing of a particular religion like Buddhism does not mean the rejection of another religion or one's own community. In fact it is important that those of you who have embraced Buddhism should not cut yourself off from your own society; you should continue to live within your own community and with its members. This is not only for your sake but for others' also, because by rejecting your community you obviously cannot benefit others, which actually is the basic aim of religion" (Dalai Lama, 1976).

Mr. Emilios Bouratinos and his colleagues of the Buddhist Society of Greece have framed certain farsighted proposals for the "rehumanization of society" which have Buddhist inspiration but which seek to involve non-Buddhist ideological groups with the aim of reaching some common ground with them on the organization of society. Mr. Bouratinos argues that Buddhists should address themselves "to all people somehow inspired from within — whether they be religionists or not. This is indispensable, for Buddhists are a tiny minority in the West and yet we must touch the hearts of many if this world is to survive in some meaningful fashion.

### **Conclusion:**

Therefore in conclude Buddhists will maintain that it is necessary to take one step at a time and that for the present our individual and collective action must go into the inner strengthening of our faith and practice. They would doubtless agree on the importance of teaching the Dharma, which we have characterized as one of the important forms of social action, but they would argue that the seduction of other kinds of social action, and the drain of energy, are greater than the opportunities which it can afford for "wearing out the shoe of *samsara*." They would argue that the best way to help other people is by personal example.

This pamphlet concedes some possible truth to the above position but also offers a wide range of evidence to the contrary, to which in retrospect the reader may now wish to return. Whatever we may feel about it, certainly the debate is a worthwhile one since, as we have seen, it points to the very heart of Buddhism — the harmony, or creative equilibrium, of Wisdom and Compassion. And as in all worthwhile debates, the disagreement, and, still more, the possible sense of disagreeableness which it engenders, offers each of us a valuable meditation.

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