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# **Buddhism and Democracy**

## **Two Essays**

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*Prof. Kurt Leidecker*



**BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY**

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# Buddhism in a Democratic World

**Prof. Kurt F. Leidecker**

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uddhism is a way of life. It is also an attitude. From these two features stems the uniqueness of Buddhism in the world.

What is that way of life and how does it integrate itself in the modern world?

1. Buddhism is not thinkable without the towering figure of the Buddha. Let us consider this first and find some clues there as to the adaptability of the way of life he preached to what we call a democratic outlook.

Though the Buddha was the founder of the way of life we call Buddhism, he never put his own person into the foreground. Instead, he put there the insight he had won in the shape of the Dhamma. He was a teacher, but such a one that will not make the acceptance of the thing he taught dependent on the fact that it was he who taught it. He never asked anyone to follow him, personally. He asked people to

think with him and, having thought, prove their findings reasonable to themselves. He left the personality of the pupil intact.

Thus we gather from the attitude of the Buddha himself that in Buddhism personality is respected above all else. Teaching and expounding of the Dhamma is carried on in the most ideal way, with no trace of indoctrination, without coercion. The pupil gives his free assent, if he so decides, with his own mind left in complete Integrity.

This is the ideal education we have been striving for all along. Education is a growth of the mind and personality. But just as the garden needs a gardener, so the pupil needs a teacher. The gardener can do no more than to hoe and weed and water. That there shall be flowers and fruits is dependent on the inherent qualities of the plants themselves. In the democratic society we recognise these fundamentals of education.

Of late they have been called progressive. Yet we know they are very ancient. We find them practised by every teacher worthy of the name.

2. The Buddha, thus, in keeping his own person in the background, centred attention on the Dhamma. He set up the Dhamma like a road-sign by the way which may be heeded or not, which is there, whether thousands pass this way or only a few. No wayfarer is

compelled to read it and benefit from its message. Of course, he will do so for his own benefit. Likewise the Four Noble Truths are there to accept or reject as man chooses. The Eightfold Noble Path is there, objectively, once it was announced. It is now, as it were, independent of its author.

So thoroughly did the Buddha eschew personality cult, that the first centuries of Buddhist history allude to him only in symbols—in the wheel, the column, the tree, the empty throne, so that the symbol came to stand for the Buddha as well as the idea he preached. The Buddha, thus, was a leader in the sense of an explorer whose discovery anyone may imitate, once given the clues. His leadership continues, but he is a gentle leader, not riding on a prancing horse, but sitting or standing, perchance walking, not with beckoning or threatening gestures, but with gestures that are reminders of his teaching and his way of love, which was gentle and illumined by an inner light.

3. The Orient respects the teacher. It thus shows that knowledge and wisdom are prized above position and wealth. For the sake of knowledge Prince Siddhartha left home; for the sake of expounding the wisdom he had acquired he renounced all. It is a commendable practice of the Thai people to have their sons spend at least three months out of their lives in imitation of the Buddha, renouncing pleasures, wealth and all

attachments, by taking the yellow robe. Thus at least once in a lifetime it is brought home to the individual that in humbleness wisdom grows, and insight, if not enlightenment, comes with detachment.

The reverence which is paid to the Buddha in his images is not worship as such. It is respect for the personality of the greatest teacher, who, having explored the highest reaches, did not withdraw to enjoy his salvation, but laboured hard to put his wisdom into simple words, restate it in many ways and phrases, so that all men, intelligent and lacking in intelligence, may understand. This is thinking which is not selfish but is social in the highest sense. Even in the unspeakable bliss of Nibbāna, the Buddha thought of his fellowmen compassionately. It is in this attitude that Buddhists reverence the Buddha, with eyes closed and an ethereal smile on his countenance. The conqueror, Jinā, not of armies but of the baser elements of human nature, draws the Buddhist to the temple. It is not Prince Siddhartha in all his splendour he bows to, but that mature person under the Bo Tree, the receptacle of wisdom. The implications for a life of reason and a peaceful attitude are patent. With this the Buddhist community should make solid contributions to the democratic way of life.

4. Though rank and splendour were not revered by the followers of the Buddha to the superlative

degree that wisdom was, the Buddhist vocabulary does contain the concept of nobility. Not only are the Fourfold Truths and the Eightfold Path to Nibbāna noble; he is noble, *ariya*, who follows in the Path. In other words, the life you lead, the thoughts you think, ennoble you, not the clothes you wear, or the title and position you hold. The monks are the real *ariya* Sangha, the company of Nobles.

All this goes to show that in Buddhism the real value is shifted from the material and worldly to the spiritual, but without denouncing wealth and prowess as an evil. There is a recognition, therefore, that all these things are necessary so long as we have not reached the highest level of thinking. Kingship and worldly pomp are accepted; however, true nobility is denied them.

The Buddha consorted with the people, the lowliest sometimes, and he felt no compunction to avoid the princely caste. In fact, he recognised caste in the sense that it represented a classification of society according to occupation. He recognised a king, he recognised a Brahman. He did not recommend a false equalisation in society, for he knew that true equality could never be in the world of appearance. A true Brahman, a true Prince, was he who, apart from appearance, had that inner worth, that nobility of thought and character.



Buddha, thus, was no reformer, least of all a revolutionary, although he has often been portrayed as such by Western scholars. He is supposed to have had in view the reconstruction of Hindu society and the elimination of caste if as a consequence of his teaching, a relaxation of the restrictive forces in Hindu society took place, that was coincidental. To say that the Buddha set out to reform society is a gross misstatement of the facts. His aim was enlightenment and the elimination of sorrow and suffering, no matter where it occurred, not of suffering of those alone who were low in the social scale. The Buddha's problem concerned the very nature and principle of suffering and death itself, not merely the sufferings due to social ills and inequality.

In fact, the Buddha has advanced, unwittingly, to his teachings, the best refutation of the justification of class struggle. His method is peaceful, does not require the conversion by force or otherwise of those who think differently, but implies setting one's own thinking in order. Salvation, *vimukti*, was not to be attained by outward means. It is an inner reformation of the spirit which thereupon is to find its outward expression in ethical activity. One cannot do the good without having an idea or notion of the good

5. It is one of the basic assumptions of democratic society that it is made up, and should be made up, of a

variety of individuals whose individuality is guaranteed. This is also the meaning and intent of Buddhism. In the Milindapañhā it is stated that as the trees differ depending on the nature of the seed, so the character and destiny of man varies with the different deeds whose consequences are earned. This is the doctrine of kamma, action, which is so universal in Indian thinking. A man becomes good by good action, and bad by bad action. The West calls it the doctrine of individual responsibility. There is only this difference: Buddhism carries it beyond the present life span of a man into his past and future.

Essentially, however, there is agreement. An individual must be held fully responsible for his thought and action, for otherwise any action of his can be excused and laws would be futile. Society would disintegrate, just as nature would, were the laws of causality not universal.

Man is by no means regarded perfect in a democratic society. In free association with his fellowmen he practises self-reliance which is allied to belief in kamma. It is the Buddhist view that man can and must perfect himself by shaping his own kamma. Yes, there is a national kamma, and the citizens of free communities believe in it, for no despot is permitted to tamper arbitrarily with justice. We are the heirs of the sins of our forefathers, but also of their virtues.

6. It follows from the kamma theory that man must have freedom to make his own decisions Whether a man wants to head toward *vimukti* and Nibbāna is his personal concern in the thinking of the Buddha. He, therefore, must imply that society also is such that it provides the necessary conditions for the attainment of Nibbāna. In other words, freedom must be guaranteed in the world.

Freedom, in fact, is the very life-blood of religion, in whatever form it may occur. Any society which believes in strict determinism will eventually ensnare man in a world of thought and action in which he can no longer move about freely. *Vimukti* then becomes impossible through individual effort.

7. It was Emerson, the American, who said, "civilization depends on morality." With this every Buddhist would agree, for *sīla* is basic to human life. Perfect speech, *sammā vācā* perfect comportment, *sammā kammanta*, and a perfect occupation or livelihood, *sammā ājīva* these are three important items of the Eightfold Path. If they break down, if, for instance, truth and sincerity are not in the word, which is the very cement of human relationships, for without language man cannot be man, society breaks down and with it civilization goes by the board. The same holds true if we behave asocially by harming our fellowmen bodily or taking from them what does not

belong to us, or engage in activity which does not make them happy and content.

In a democratic society and one that believes in spiritual freedom there is room, then, for those virtues which we prize in the West and which we include in the phrase “the milk of human kindness.” In Buddhism, likewise, both bhikkhu and layman are encouraged to move and have their being in the Divine Abodes, the *brahmavihāras*: *mettā*, *karuṇā*, *muditā* and *upekkhā*.

*Mettā* is good will-and friendship. With it the true Buddhist should permeate all quarters. The same with *karuṇā*, compassion with all living creatures, for all are heirs to sorrow and suffering. Scholars have not yet agreed on the meaning of *muditā*. They call it disinterested love, as if love could ever be disinterested. Perhaps sympathy is the English equivalent. *Upekkhā* has been given as “hedonic neutrality or indifference,” yet equanimity perhaps is the correct translation

8. A society which incorporates the concept of freedom rather than repression and suppression, and a religion which permits the unrestricted exercise of the human will to perfect itself, will inevitably be characterised by tolerance. There are two kinds of tolerance, one that just bears with the dissenter, and

the other that as a genuine interest in the heterodoxy though it does not subscribe to it. The right to dissent is

jealously guarded by all democratic nations. For man must realise that he does not possess the ultimate truth, that he is groping in opinion, however well founded, so long as he has his human limitations.

The same right is implied in Buddhist thinking. For the ultimate reality, Nibbāna, is indefinable and inexpressible. If, thus, either you or I start out in search of it, we do so to the best of our knowledge and intent. It would be illogical if not unethical to fight because of any differences.

9. The conclusion, I think, is now easily drawn as to the place of Buddhism in a democratic world. its place is firmly anchored therein.

Buddhism is bound to make a major contribution to the freedom loving, democratically governed nations which cannot be otherwise than profound.

The Buddhist's way of life is secure as long as the spirit of the Buddha's words is alive. The overt enemy is easily recognised, but the subversion of thought is subtle, indeed. Hence, it is paramount to be grounded not merely in action and know Buddhist philosophy also.

We glibly say "right" action, "right" thought,

“right” determination, meaning that they should be perfect, not merely correct. Yet it takes not merely intuition, not merely habit, to do the right or perfect thing. It takes thought, for how can the “right,” the *sammā* or perfect, be determined otherwise than in thought? Shall we settle the question by action, shall we use the stick or the gun? Man must be a thinker, and only as a thinker is he man.

Buddhasāsana is based on thought. It stands or falls with the grand and simple ideas that the Buddha has given us and which he has won for us in his profound *dhyāna*. The enemies of Buddhism are enemies of its ideas. While outwardly they fawn on Buddhist ways and practices, they pervert the thought by subtle dialectic. The gravest danger to the Buddhist community consists in that it may not recognise the intellectual attack, and is unprepared by logic and fundamental thinking to repel the onslaught.

Let us, therefore, recapitulate the main ideas on Buddhasāsana which form the sure foundation of a democratic world and a democratic way of life:

True leadership,  
Respect for personality,  
Teaching without domination,  
Nobility of thought and character rather than of  
wealth or station,

Reconstruction and rehabilitation of the inner  
man rather than revolutionising society,  
Individual responsibility,  
Self-reliance,  
Freedom of choice and action,  
Morality as the basis of society,  
Good will,  
Kindness,  
Peacefulness, and tolerance.

There is no finer list of virtues than that. All men of high purpose will agree with Buddhists in their aim to perfect the person, in order to make the world a better place to live in.

From *The Golden Lotus*, August, 1960.

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# **The Buddha and Democratic Principles**

**Buddhadāsa P. Kirthisinghe**

The basic principle of a democratic form of government is the freedom and dignity of the individual with equality before the law. No man can be called free unless he is able to pursue his calling unhampered by barriers of caste, class, or special privilege. In a deeper sense no man is truly free until he can without fear or pressure from authoritarian coercion, unfold his innate potentialities and perfect himself by shaping his own *Kamma* or destiny. It was the Buddha who for the first time taught and realised these values through his Dhamma. It has led to a flowering of a civilization that, to this day, stands as a marvel in the history of mankind.

Three centuries later it led, for the first time in the annals of mankind, to establish hospitals for both men and animals and organise universal education which culminated in establishing international centres of learning, known today as universities. With the spread of Buddhism in greater Asia from the 3rd century B.C. it stimulated the formation of new civilizations depending on the national genius of the inhabitants in each State. These civilizations produced a fascinating array of art and dance forms, literature, and social and economic institution based on the Dhamma.

## **Democratic Values**



The recognised prerequisites of democratic cultures are:

- A productive economy to raise man above the level of poverty and misery.
- A progressive society with security and opportunity for all.
- A literate society with universal education.
- Personal liberty and self-reliance.
- A system of ethics based on moral law.
- Deep-rooted respect for the system of values and institutions that helped each culture to evolve into great civilizations.

These values were respected in the ancient Buddhist civilization of Asia, particularly in the Asokan period from the 3rd Century B.C., the golden period of Indian history. These conditions exist today in highly industrialised Japan where there is a predominantly Buddhist civilization, and in the newly emerged Buddhist States of Asia. These technically backward nations are rebuilding their economies to raise the standard of living of their people. Among these, Ceylon has an almost fully literate society with free education from kindergarten up to university.

Buddhism has given each man or woman sturdy

independence, rather than dependence on the mercy of a Creator God to better themselves. The Buddha taught man the gospel of self-help in his efforts to lead a noble life. To achieve the highest conditions of mind and heart, the Buddha said man must work out his own way. He asserted that man's own deeds would make him noble and advised him to guard against deeds that would make him low.

Further, the Buddha stated that all beings, including man, are suffering, and through his Noble Eight-fold Path he gave an efficacious prescription how to make an end of that suffering. Since that Path is a road of gradual progress it is intelligible and practicable by all, even on the lowest rungs of human development. None is excluded from reaching final deliverance if only he takes resolutely one step after the other on that road. Thus we see that the Buddha conceded equality to all human beings—a cardinal principle in a democratic society.

Thus, the Buddha founded the clarion-call of human liberty. He said. "Take ye refuge unto yourself; be ye your own salvation. With earnestness and high resolve work out your own salvation."

The Buddha pointed out the absolute folly of artificial distinctions between man and man. At the time of the Buddha there was a rigid caste system in

India. It determined and fixed man's place in the social order by the mere fact that one's father was of such and such a descent and had such and such an occupation. The low castes were denied an education and were placed low on the social ladder, and this with such a rigidity that a low caste man could hardly break out of his situation. The Buddha revolted against this injustice and asserted the equality of all men as far as their basic rights are concerned.

The Buddha unhesitatingly admitted to his Order of Monks also people of the so-called low castes—barbers, butchers, sweepers, and the untouchable—along with the members of the noble and priestly castes. He made absolutely no distinctions between them in the ranks of the monks. All received equal homage, reverence and respect. Some members of the nobility were upset by these actions of the Buddha and one of them dared challenge the Buddha to define a nobleman. It was then that he declared:

“No man is noble by birth,  
No man is ignoble by birth.  
Man is noble by his own deeds,  
Man is ignoble by his own deeds”

Commenting on the Buddha's discourse, the Sigālovāda sutta, [1] which is based on social ethics, the world-famous British scholar, Professor Rhys

Davids, chairman of the Department of Comparative Religion, Manchester University, England, says: “Happy would have been the village or the clan on the banks of the Ganges, when the people were full of kindly spirit of fellow feelings, the noble spirit of justice, which breathes through these naive and simple sayings.” He adds: “Not less happy would be the village on the banks of the Thames, today, of which this could be said.”

He continues: “The Buddha’s doctrine of love and good will between man and man is here let forth in domestic and social ethics with more comprehensive details than elsewhere ... And truly we may say even now of this Vinaya or code of discipline, so fundamental are the human interests involved, so sane and wide is the wisdom that envisages them that the utterances are as fresh and practically as binding today as they were then, at Rajagaha (India).”

The Buddha strongly condemned all sacrifices performed in the name of religion, particularly those involving animal sacrifices. It was believed at that time, that sacrifices atoned for sin and protected against evil spirits. The Buddha said that these sacrifices were cruel and useless, as it is only through a noble life that man can elevate himself and be secure against evil.

The Buddha's compassion extended also to those who were ailing. Once he said to his disciples: "Whoever, monks, nurses the sick, will nurse me." And in that spirit hospitals for both animals and men were later established during the reign of Asoka in 3rd century B.C.

The Buddha condemned slavery in any shape and form. He laid down golden rules for the right manner of earning one's living in a way not harmful to others, and this included also that any trafficking in human beings was out of bounds for a Buddhist.

The temperance movement owes its beginnings to the Buddha who asked his followers to abstain from using or selling liquor and other intoxicants.

## **Gospel of Tolerance**

The Buddha also preached the gospel of tolerance, of compassion, loving kindness and non-violence. He taught men not to despise other religions and not to belittle them. He further declared that one should not even accept his own teachings unless one found them to be in accord with one's personal reasoning, according to the Kalama Sutta. [2]

During the Buddha's time there were a number of great kingdoms in India such as Magadha and Kosala,

and some of them were established on the democratic form of government. The Buddha favoured the democrat form over the oligarchical form of government as it was the best form of government which is conducive to the stability of society.

The Buddha showed great admiration of the Vajjis or Licchavis. In the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* he likened the Licchavis to the Thirty-three Gods (*Tāvatiṃsa-deva*). He also warned *Vassakāra*, minister of the parricide king Ajātasattu that the Vajjis would remain invincible as long as they adhered to the seven rules of a nation's welfare (*aparihāniya dhamma*), namely:

- Frequent meetings for consultation.
- Concord in action.
- Adherence to injunctions and traditions.
- Respecting elders.
- Respecting women, who shall never be molested.
- Reverence to places of worship within and outside the territory.
- Protection of worthy saints in the territory.

The Buddha continued: "So long as the Vajjis meet frequently in council, assemble and disperse in

harmony (and observe the other rules of welfare), their prosperity is to be expected, not their decline.”

## **Asoka's reign**

The Emperor Asoka worked with ceaseless energy for the propagation of Buddhism and transformed it into a world religion. The Asokan period from 325 to 288 B.C. is of special significance to mankind, as it is one of the most illustrious liberal democratic periods in history.

In his time Asoka established public gardens, medical herbs were cultivated, trees were planted along roads, hospitals were established for both men and animals. He sank wells for public use, and educational and religious institutions grew up all over the country.

The late H. G. Wells writes in his *Outline of World History*: “Amidst the tens of thousands of names of monarchs that crowd the columns of history, their majesties and graciousnesses, and sovereignties and royal highnesses and the like, the name of Asoka shines and shines almost alone a star. From the Volga to Japan his name is still honoured. China, Tibet and even India, though it has left his doctrine, preserves the traditions of his greatness. More living men cherish his memory today than ever heard the names

of Constantino and Charlemagne.

It is claimed that Asoka was one of the first to grant gender equality by sending his own son and daughter to Ceylon for missionary work. In this vast empire, Asoka treated all his subjects with equal justice and admitted no privileges of caste or class.

Formation of democratic thought originated in ancient India by the spread of Buddhism from the 3rd century B.C. In an introduction to the book *Legacy of India*, Lord Zetland, former Viceroys of India, states: "And it may come as a surprise to many to learn that in assemblies of Buddhists in India, two thousand or more years ago, are to be found rudiments of our own parliamentary system as practised today."

Professor G. P. Malalasekera says: "The spread of Buddhism from country to country in greater Asia was without bloodshed and it is by itself a great democratic process never witnessed by any other world religion."

*From World Buddhism, Vesak Annual 1963.*



# Notes

1. Translated in [The Wheel No. 14](#), *Everyman's Ethics*. [\[Back\]](#)
2. Translated in [The Wheel No. 8](#). [\[Back\]](#)

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