

## REFLECTION OF DEMOCRACY IN BUDDHISM

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### Abstract

*Despite the rapid advances made by civilization in this century, the most immediate cause of our present dilemma is our undue emphasis solely on material development. Today we have abandoned to foster the most basic human needs of love, kindness, cooperation and caring. We have lost the essential humanity that is our foundation. Buddhism is a way of life. Buddhism is not thinkable without the towering figure of the Buddha. It is also an attitude. From these two features stems the uniqueness of Buddhism in the world. It has flourished in a diversity of forms, while repeatedly renewing, through study and practice, its roots in the teachings of the Buddha. This kind of pluralistic approach, in which individuals themselves are responsible, is very much in accord with a democratic outlook. As a spiritual community its cohesion has sprung from a unifying sense of brotherhood and sisterhood. This paper is an attempt to draw attention to democracy and democratic values in Buddhism and also to bring forth the remarkable contributions of Buddhism in this aspect.*

**Keywords:** *Buddhism, Democracy, Democratic Values*



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## Introduction

Democracy has a long history and one has to go back to more than two thousand years to trace its origin and to find out and realize its features, practices and institutions. Ideas about modern representational democracy spread in Western Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries and so we see a lot of democracies mounting in Europe in more recent times. Today, suddenly there is a great surge of democracy in the Western world. In Eastern Europe, in many parts of the Third World, democracy is rising and this is becoming an era of democracy. Non-Western political democracy takes its early form in India, in village 'Panchayats' in isolated places about 2300, 2400 or 2500 years ago. Some of these developed under the influence of Buddhism. But for a long time most of the countries in Asia were governed by autocratic monarchs and colonialism till the 20th century. We must then conclude that as a wide range of government, democracy had a very limited history

everywhere in the world. In Asia we had great civilizations but not much democracy. 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 Viceroy 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.”

## **1. Concepts and Elements of Democracy**

Etymologically, the term “Democracy” consists of two Greek words: “Demos” meaning ‘the people’ and “Kratos” meaning ‘power’. The literal meaning of the word “Democracy” is thus “Power of the people”. As a way of life among a given people, democracy is simply put in day-to-day practice where human beings are regarded as equals, every person is respected, everyone’s role is understood and appreciated, everybody has the opportunity to be heard and understood, and everybody has the right to participate in decision-making on matters that affect their lives’ (A Guide for Peer Educators, 2011).

Democracy is a form of government which provides the citizens with most freedom, most opportunities, and the most contented life. The spread of democratic governments in many parts of Asia, Central and Eastern Europe and Africa in the late 1980s and early 1990s had been an important inclination in world. It means the importance of democracy is growing more in the contemporary period. A true democracy allows free speech: government by the people, a representative government, and the state having a government elected by the people. The democracy of the courts in such a government provides equal justice for all: fairness, equality, political equality.

## **2. Buddhism and Democratic Values**

Buddha was the originator of the way of life which we call Buddhism. He taught man the gospel of self-help in his efforts to lead a noble life. To achieve the highest state of affairs 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. He never asked anyone to follow him, personally fairly asked people to think with him and, having thought, prove their findings sensible to themselves. The Buddha, thus, was a leader in the sense of a surveyor whose discovery anyone may imitate, once given the clues. The Buddha, thus, in keeping his own person in the background, centered 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.

The Buddha saw that life's very purpose is happiness. He also saw that while ignorance binds beings in endless frustration and suffering, wisdom is liberating. Modern democracy is based on the principle that all human beings are essentially equal, that each one of us has an equal right to life, liberty, and happiness. Buddhism too recognizes that human beings are at liberty to dignity, that all members of the human family have inalienable right to liberty, not presently in terms of political freedom, but also freedom from fear and want. Irrespective of whether we are rich or poor, educated or uneducated, belonging to one nation or another, to one religion or another, adhering to this ideology or that, each of us is just a human being like everyone else. Not only do we all desire happiness but each of us has an equal right to pursue these goals.

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 hampered by barriers of caste, class, or special privilege. In a deeper sense no man is truly free until he can without fear 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. 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 (*World Buddhism, Vesak Annual 1963*).

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. Undoubtedly, Buddhism provided the foundation for the adoption of culture, thoughts, idioms and common spiritual beliefs and practices among people in India, China, Japan, Korea and in other parts of Asia. Through the movement of ideas and peoples, Buddhism integrated many societies and regions, effectively interweaving them into a common culture of ethical values.

***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 valued in the ancient Buddhist civilization of Asia, particularly in the Ashokan period from the 3rd Century B.C., the golden period of Indian history. The Buddha stated that there is suffering, and through his Noble Eightfold Path he gave an effective instruction to make an end of that suffering. None is excluded from reaching final liberation if only he takes one step purposefully on that road. Thus we see that the Buddha conceded equality to all human beings—a cardinal principle in a democratic society. The Buddha revolted against this injustice like rigid caste system, denial of education to the low castes and asserted the equality of all men as far as their basic rights are concerned. He made no distinctions between barbers, butchers, sweepers, and the untouchable-along with the noble and priestly castes.

The world famous British scholar, Professor Rhys Davids, chairman of the Department of Comparative Religion, Manchester University, England, commenting on Buddha in the Sigālovāda sutta, which is based on social ethics, 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.”The Buddha strongly condemned all sacrifices performed in the name of religion, particularly those involving animal sacrifices and said that these sacrifices were cruel and useless.

### **3. Buddhism and Democracy**

In ancient period the ideas of Buddha reflect the core contribution of democracy and quite different and notable one. His ideas like economic development, human rights, right to freedom, right to religion and women empowerment are considered as some of the essential concepts for development democracy.

The similarity between Buddhism and democracy is perceived in the teachings of the Buddha. His advocacy of tolerance, the idea of discussion, extraordinary freedom of choice, equality, non-violence, and impermanence - every one of these ideas went against the customs of his time. They were revolutionary concepts introduced by the Buddha 2500 years

ago. They were major intellectual innovations. But they were all democratic in content and intent." (From a lecture delivered by Prof. Ralph Buultjens on "Buddhism and Democracy.")

The history of Asian narratives explains how, at one level, Buddhism fulfilled the people's quest for religious beliefs, and at yet another level, enabled people to connect to higher values of spiritualism without abandoning their faith or religion. The early Buddhist community itself was open to all, regardless of caste, class, ethnicity, culture and gender, and its emancipatory aspirations excluded none—an historical fact on the basis of which some contemporary Buddhists assert the basic compatibility of Buddhism and the substantive principles of democracy. And, the internal dynamics of the monastic community—as revealed especially in the Vinaya—have also been seen as prefiguring procedural principles embodied in modern democratic institutions. Ratnapala (1997). 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.

The institution the Buddha established was the Sangha or monastic community, which functioned on largely democratic lines. Buddhism also has many doctrines that fit with democracy such as individualism, allowing people to develop their own intelligence to the fullest than having to give out whatever their duty is, parents, cast etc. This is very much in consonant with democracy. Buddhism teaches each person to have the opportunity to build up their own being towards enlightenment, to the fullest extent in life. That is the highest thing in the society. The core ethics of Buddhism, stress on the changes and reform of every society with its nature of interdependence and interconnection which led our societies towards adaptation and cooperation.

At the core of Buddhism lies the potential of an individual for realizing precision towards the goal of attaining enlightenment and hence contributed to the foundation of democratic culture in many Asian societies. The Buddhist emphasizes on the need for *Sangha* where decisions are taken jointly. Similarly, the *Vinaya* rules for monastic community infused a culture of democratic traditions. Thus, Buddhist virtues provide individuals the greatest opportunity to realize their potential and yet also to cultivate a sense of universal responsibility. Buddhism created a space for flexibility allowing one to think

beyond fixed ideas to seek actions for consequences and change. It provided the model for people to realise the need for transforming self and societies irrespective of race, nationality or gender.

A Buddhist principle has let most profound impacts on us today. It has allowed societies and nations to seek alteration without being in a conflictual state. Buddhism allowed modernity and change and majority of our societies have accepted basic Western values within the realm of our traditional culture and values. Buddhism as a science, as a philosophy, ethical system should be well understood by the lay worldly population. This movement to democracy involves some serious improvement also in the educational curriculum. 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.

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 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.

#### **4. Concluding Remarks**

Though Buddhism declined in India after the fifth and sixth centuries, its principles still forms the core values of Indian foreign policy. The essence of Buddhist influence lies in co-optive power, allowing nations to pursue welfare. India's domestic performance (democracy and pluralism) and external pursuit (independent and non-aligned foreign policy) have their foundation in the Buddhist doctrine of *Madhyamika*. At the core of Buddhism lies the idea of exploring the potential of an individual for realizing perfection towards the goal of attaining enlightenment. This philosophical virtue contributed to the foundation of democratic culture in many societies. One of the most profound impacts of Buddhism on

Asia has been the infusion of non-conflicting philosophic traditions. Buddhist principles allowed societies and nations to seek transformation without being in a conflictual situation. The long practice achieved through Buddhist traditions in due course created an atmosphere of peace in Asia. Since Buddhism is not a religion in the dogmatic sense, it created a space for flexibility and allowed one to think beyond fixed ideas to look for actions for consequences and change. It provided the template for people to understand the need for transforming self and societies irrespective of race, nationality or gender.

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