

# Reflections of Buddhism on Modern Democracy - A 21st Century Perspective

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**Abstract** - The objective of this research is to assess the compatibility between Democracy and Buddhism. Investigating different aspects of a good vibrant democracy such as Equality, Diversity, Governance and Law, Tolerance, sustainability through core principles of Democracy and the Sutras of Buddhism, this research intends to find coherence or antagonism. Thematic analysis was used along with secondary research across academia, scriptures and scholarly works. Seeds of democratic practice are recognizable, early on in the Buddhist way of life. The framework in Buddhism as a religious philosophy and the framework within democracy as a governance mechanism were compatible with social and cultural values in the societies at large. Findings indicate that Buddhist society is democratic in nature with the relationship between Buddhism and democracy being interwoven, to the extent that sometimes it is difficult to find the difference in structure. Historically or in the current times, Buddhism seems to be a living religion that has been adopted as per the state of affairs of a particular time, culture or place. This makes it even more pertinent to delve in and leverage its principles to promote a secular and value-based world.

**Keywords:** Democracy, Buddhism, Governance, Equality, Tolerance

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In *Buddhist Ideals in Government* (2011) published by the Buddhist Publication Society, the author, Gunaseela Vitanaage, writes:

*“It must be remembered that the Buddha was born into a society which, comparatively speaking, was politically advanced and through the ages had developed certain very solid ideas of government.”* (Vitanaage 4, 2011)

As Buddha came from a Hindu monarchy background, the question that arose was that did Buddha consider autocracy or monarchy as the ideal form of government. When we talk about an ideal form of Government in modern times, we tend to refer to democracy as a model form of government that is upheld by the nations like the United States of America, India, the United Kingdom and approx. 164 more in varying versions of democracy.

During the Buddha’s era, not only were there great kingdoms, such as Kosala and Magadha but there were also many states like Shakyas, Koliyas and Mallas that were considered to be democratic. Through various teachings and scriptures, the Buddha definitely conveyed his favour of the democratic government as he believed that it was most conducive to maintaining the society’s stability. Although the primary scriptures of Buddhism do not cast an exact philosophy for politics, a polysemantic study of the Pali Sutta indicates a governmental ideal that aligns with the salvation based Buddhist teachings (Bukkyō Kenkyū, 563-480 B.C.)

Many scholars claim the very foundations of Buddhist society were democratic in nature, with the connection between Buddhism and democracy having had a long association. Infact Dr B. R. Ambedkar, Indian Constitution’s architect declared, in a Radio broadcast speech, addressing the nation on 3 October 1954:

*“Positively, my Social Philosophy may be said to be enshrined in three words: Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. Let no one, however, say that I have borrowed my philosophy from the French Revolution. I have not. My philosophy has roots in religion and not in political science. I have derived them from the teachings of my Master, the Buddha. In his philosophy, liberty and equality had a place.”*

During the Pala period 8th–12th century, though some erstwhile Buddhist societies have been known to be feudalistic, the relationship between the landowners and peasants was often voluntary in nature. Peasants could own land themselves and had mobility, thus free-thinking Buddhist societies supported autonomy.

Modern Democracy is a system of government in which the citizens determine the policies of governance via direct voting, elected representatives, or a combination of both. Voters do have the capacity to change the governing parties and the leaders within based on merit and popular support. A democracy allows all residents to participate in the electoral processes and ensures that it does not exclude any minorities on the basis of gender, race, sexual orientation or class. Hence, democracies are important in achieving equality for oppressed or minority groups. Democracies are the most statistically significant in reducing intrastate and inter conflict as apart from allowing everyone to have an equal voice, it is also inherently a flexible system, which allows for the government to adapt according to changing ideologies. (Analytical Theory of Democracy: History, Mathematics and Applications, Tangian, Andranik, 2020)

So, the main question that arises is what then is the common ground between Buddhism and Modern Democracy? Were they truly antagonistic, thereby forcing the future Buddhist democrats into the very uncomfortable choice between values that seem to be individually attractive yet are still unsatisfiable jointly? Or were they frameworks that were compatible with regards to social values, and these can somehow be joined with one another to gain a consistent whole?

In this paper, it is argued that not only Buddhism and democracy are quite congruous, but that they both are complementary in a much deeper sense. Democracy is strengthened by values drawn from Buddhist social and moral theory, and Buddhist social and moral theory also tends to gain concrete procedural and institutional distinction when it is articulated through the framework of the liberal democratic theory.

## **DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH STUDY**

### ***Research Aim***

This research study aims to examine the compatibility between Democracy and Buddhism by applying scriptures from the Pali Canon, also called Tipitaka, of the Theravada branch of Buddhism.

### ***Data Collection***

The study is based on both primary and secondary data. Key secondary sources were mainly the following suttas - Kalama, Aggañña, Udana, Vasala, Mahāparinibbāna, Madhura, Kannakathala, Assalāyana, Nipata and Āyācana Sutta. Democratic policies and documents from the nations of South Asia were used to draw parallels to assess the influence of Buddhism on Modern Democracy.

### ***Data Analysis***

This research is done through a Thematic Analysis of the following themes, that demonstrate the ideals of Democracy early on in the Buddhist way of life:

#### ***1. Buddhism and Equality***

Equality of the individuals is essential to determine the direction in which democracy should proceed. In a democracy, each individual has an equal footing, purely basis their idea's merit and the majority held values. This is irrespective of their advantages and disadvantages. That is why equality is important in determining the presence of democracy in a Buddhist Society.

#### ***2. Governance and Law***

Law and proper governance are essential in maintaining order along with the fundamental rights of citizens in society. In Buddhist society, even though the form of governance was Monarchy, the use of democratic principles by the rulers through Buddha's teachings shows that rule of law is essential to maintain harmony.

#### ***3. Tolerance and Buddhism***

Society must respect everyone for their opinions and beliefs even though they differ from each other. This is important to promote a positive and amiable attitude towards outgroups because members of a democratic society listen and appreciate different opinions. Religious intolerance is a key problem even in modern times and solving it is essential in a Buddhist and modern society.

## **BUDDHISM AND EQUALITY**

In the current times, the concept of equality has become increasingly varied as it includes many more freshly evolving problems such as the job allocation and possibilities, the control of natural resources between countries and the political representation of distinct communities etc. Therefore, it's important to discuss this concept as it serves a crucial position. (United Nations, 2020).

The Huayan Sutra concludes with the same philosophy "one is all, and all is one". This essentially indicates all creatures can become Buddha. Ones who focus on the mind, so the mind, Buddha and all creatures

are the same. This distinctive contribution of Huayan includes that the ultimate reality is similar to common sense and that realisation leads to universal compassion.

The Mahayana Buddhists still believe that we all humans inherently have the 'Buddha Nature', i.e. we have the ability to become enlightened and hence everyone should be treated equally. Several sutras associated with the Gupta period mention this term (c. 4th–6th centuries CE). Our culture, race or background does not matter. "Buddha-nature is within us - truthful, pure, perfect and peaceful. The difference between any person and Buddha is that that person has not aroused his or her "true nature" (Instilling Goodness School, Following the Buddha's footsteps, 2020)

There are no divisions at all, once enlightenment has been reached. Matsumoto Shirō points out that Buddha-nature translates the Sanskrit-term *buddhadhātu* and it does not translate to the Buddhahood attainment possibility, or Buddha's original nature (Japanese Journal of Religious Studies, 2001). We all have a Tathāgata (referring to Buddha) within ourselves in a seed or embryo and this idea essentially enables the sentient beings to become Buddhas.

### **Caste System**

Amongst scholars, it is a common belief across the Buddhist Texts that the Buddha had taught that that social supremacy based on *jāti* (birth) and *varna* (colour, race) was unattainable, that all men were equal. The implication is that the Buddha and Buddhism were opposed to the prevalent Brahmanical castes which were non-commensal, hierarchically graded and often governed by a legal system with unequal obligations and rights (Buddhism and Caste System, 1998). In a Buddhist society, there is also no justification for anyone being untouchable outside their own caste group. (Buddhism and Caste System, 1998). In particular, the Aggañña Sutta urges uniform opportunities and rights for everyone as fellow humans, irrespective of their race or caste (Majjhima Nikāya, Dīgha-nikāya, 2001)

The Buddha himself was born into a caste-based society. The Buddhists did not support the caste system as it was considered an example of discrimination. According to Y. Krishan, in the journal article "East and West", Vol. 48, Buddhists teach that any form of bias is akin to being ignorant. The very belief that some people feel that they are superior to others around themselves is unfortunate as it reflects some craving or fear.

The Buddha himself declared that any caste system had no place in the new monastic order. In the Udāna Sutta collection, he says:

*"Just as, O monks, the great rivers Ganga, Yamuna, Achiravati, Sarabhu, and Mahi, on reaching the ocean, lose their earlier name and identity and come to be reckoned as the great ocean, similarly, O monks, people of the four castes . . . who leave the household and become homeless recluses under the doctrine and discipline declared by the Tathagata, lose their previous names and identities and are reckoned as recluses who are sons of Shakya."* (Udāna, Piyadassi Thera, 2020)

Buddha answered Sundarika Bhāradvāja, the brahmin who inquired about his lineage:

*"No Brahmin, I no prince,  
No farmer, or aught else.  
All worldly ranks I know,  
But knowing go my way  
as simply nobody:  
Homeless, in pilgrim garb,  
With shaven crown, I go  
my way alone, serene.  
To ask my birth is vain."*

A brahmin once insulted Buddha by saying. "Stop, thou shaveling! Stop, thou outcast!"

The Master, without any feeling of indignation, gently replied:

*"Birth makes not a man an outcast,  
Birth makes not a man a brahmin;  
Action makes a man an outcast, Vintagemakes a man a brahmin."*  
(Sutta-nipāta, 142, N.D. )

He later delivered the Vasala Sutta, explaining the characteristics of an outcast.

The Chinese pilgrims Fa-Hien, I-Tsing and Yuan Chang indicate that the concepts were equalitarian and democratic and were still promoted in India. This is centuries after Buddha's demise.

As per Sutta-Nipāta 142, Buddhists believe that when people tend to discriminate amongst each other, then their behaviour tends to reflect ignorance and a poor attitude towards one another. This very ignorant behaviour and a sense of craving causes people to suffer greatly – this is also known as grief “dukkha”. Buddhists believe in Upekkha “equanimity” - having an equal attitude and treatment towards everyone in society.

The Madhura sutta (84), the Kannakatthala sutta (90) and the Assalāyana sutta (93) of the Majjhima-nikaya, the Cullavagga ix.1.4 of the Vinaya Pitaka, etc. all recognize the existence of four castes: Cattāro vannā, Kṣatriya, Brāhmaṇa, Vaisya and Sūdra. In the Kannakatthala sutta the superiority of Ksatriya and Brāhmaṇa castes is recognized: *dve vannā aggam akkhāyanti*: the two castes are said to be chief and therefore deserve respect and service by the other two castes.

*“In the Madhura Sutta, after the Buddha's death, King Avantiputta of Madhurā visits Venerable Mahā Kaccāna and questions him regarding the brahmin claims to superiority over other castes. Maha Kaccāna explains brahmin experiences the result of his actions both good and bad, in this world and in the next. This is similar to members of other castes namely the nobles, workers and merchants. A brahmin ascetic receives the same homage and respect just like an ascetic of other castes. At the end of the discourse, King Avantiputta agrees that all caste members are equal with no difference.”* (Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1894).

According to Indian Census 2011 87% of Buddhists were mostly Dalits, who have actually converted from other religions, to evade the pervasive oppression of castes. The remaining 13% of Buddhists belong to traditional communities of the northern Himalayan regions and northeast. The Indian Census indicates that there were approximately 8.4 million Buddhists.

### **Gender Equality**

According to Buddha, if any woman or man went in this direction of religious benightment, they would approach nirvana in this vehicle.

This is not to say that all forms of actual discrimination were eliminated. It must be noted that in India during these times of the 7th century BCE, women were subjected to the control of their husbands and families; their very existence as individuals was given little recognition. Against this background, Buddhism gave them the opportunity to leave their oppressive families and seek personal salvation. This was a truly revolutionary philosophy as religious enlightenment was at the core of Buddhism as described in “The place of women in Buddhism” De Silva (1994). She argues that sangha may have appealed to women because the rigid caste system largely ignored them, thereby giving them very little importance. Both genders’ capacity to realise religious enlightenment equally can be confirmed in various texts.

*“Whoever—monk, nun, lay male follower, or female lay follower—keeps practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma, who keeps practicing masterfully, who live in accordance with the Dhamma: That is the person who worships, honors, respects, venerates, and pays homage to the Tathāgata with the highest homage. So you should train yourselves: ‘We will keep practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma, we will keep practicing masterfully, we will live in accordance with the Dhamma.’ That is how you should train yourselves.”* (MahāParinibbāna Sutta, Dīgha Nikāya 16, N.D. )

The second universal truth as per Buddhist teachings is that all things are transitory which means that in one life cycle, a woman could be born a man and in the next life cycle, it could be vice versa. According to the Buddha, Gender was considered to be a part of the self. Thereby the conclusion can be that sexual identity is irrelevant to Samsāra’s release; only karma of the being matters. Also, Dharma is a life path, so ignores gender by its very nature. (Journal of Buddhist Ethics, 2014)

Texts state that Buddha reconsidered the entry of women to his Enlightenment after his aunt, Maha Pajapati and stepmother refused to abandon the path to Awakening, inspite of him rejecting them thrice. With Buddha’s cousin Ananda support, they then led 500 Koliyan and Sakyan ladies to follow the sangha round the clock. It was after 5 years that the Buddha allowed the women to be ordained as nuns, upon finally realizing that both genders had an equal capacity for reaching Nirvana. (BDEA & BuddhaNet, 1996).

Dhanañjānī, the wife of the brahmin Bhāradvāja, had strong faith in Buddha’s teachings, as observed in the Dhanañjānī Sutta. It was she, who convinced her husband to atleast speak with the Enlightened One. Bhāradvāja later converted, was inducted, and went on to become a respected arahant.

In his book, Asian Religions a Cultural Perspective, William Nadeau explains "In the Mahayana countries, however, the nuns' order remains strong, particularly in Tibet and in Chinese speaking communities." (Asian Religions a Cultural Perspective, William Nadeau)

According to Dr Toshie Kurihara, in the 6th Century, the men were seen as the proponents of the entire community, and hence it was the men who compiled the sutras. However, this, at times led them to incorporate their own views into the sutras, especially after the Buddha’s passing. Hence, the original spirit of Buddha was

diluted and the ideas of the male monks got recorded as sutras. This generated a philosophy of degrading discriminatory views of women that runs counter to the very original spirit of Buddha's teachings. (IOP, 2018)

### **Sangha**

In Buddhism, dhamma practice is essentially spiritual training and at the core of Dhamma. It is said that all things in the world are impermanent and illusory. All of us deserve the same empathy and compassion as regardless of rank, ethnicity, gender, birth, birth race and beliefs, we are all the same in the samsara of suffering.

*“Bhagavato sāvaka-saṅgho,  
The Saṅgha of the Blessed One's disciples who have practised well,  
Uju-paṭipanno bhagavato sāvaka-saṅgho,  
the Saṅgha of the Blessed One's disciples who have practised straightforwardly,  
Ñāya-paṭipanno bhagavato sāvaka-saṅgho,  
the Saṅgha of the Blessed One's disciples who have practised methodically,  
Sāmīci-paṭipanno bhagavato sāvaka-saṅgho,  
the Saṅgha of the Blessed One's disciples who have practised masterfully,  
Yadidaṃ cattāri purisa-yugāni aṭṭha purisa-puggalā:  
i.e., the four pairs—the eight types—of noble ones:  
Esa bhagavato sāvaka-saṅgho—  
That is the Saṅgha of the Blessed One's disciples—  
Āhuneyyo pāhuneyyo dakkhiṇeyyo añjali-karaṇīyo,  
worthy of gifts, worthy of hospitality, worthy of offerings, worthy of respect,  
Anuttaraṃ puññakkhettaṃ lokassaṭi.  
the incomparable field of merit for the world.”*

As mentioned in the above sutta, the Buddhist society was called 'Sangha' which holistically means company. As the Sangha consists of members from all castes who will be treated equally, therefore this is considered as the true society of equality. Parameters like birth, family background, economic status, education levels are not considered as the order or regulation utilized by the Sangha was the seniority system, which regarded only the age of when one begins joining the society. So instead, each one's behaviour, knowledge as Arahantship is praised. The Sangha society was hence mutually well accepted, peaceful and respectful.

In Buddhism, whether as a Sangha member (Inner core) or outside as a member of a larger community, individuals irrespective of rank, caste, creed, birth have the freedom of expression given as right.

If there is one area where equality should ideally be achieved, it is the intrinsic dignity and value of every human being, although, as we know, there are individuals who, in the light of their actions, have their own dignity and value diminished somewhat.

Buddhists truly believe that every person should be treated fairly and is valued. There is no fundamental difference between any being so they must be treated with justice. Bechert describes the sangha as “egalitarian” because it was the only group during those times that was open to everyone irrespective of caste with all members having equal obligations and rights. He also suggests that this defined early Buddhism as an elitist movement as only those who could grasp this very philosophical and abstract way of thinking about salvation through Nirvana would be attracted enough to join the sangha. (Journal of the British Association for the Study of Religion, 2018)

The democratic practices were found even in the Buddhist brotherhood. As Dr Ambedkar reminds us that twice before Buddha's death, he was requested to announce the head of the Sangha, to control it. But each time he declined to be a dictator and appoint a successor, stating Dhamma is after all the Supreme Commander of the Sangha.

Immediately after his awakening, the Buddha wondered whether or not he should enlighten others about the Dharma also known as the life path. This incidence has been captured in Pali scriptures of Āyācana Sutta, Samyutta Nikaya VI.1. He was apprehensive that mortal beings were so overpowered by greed, ignorance and hatred that they would never be able to recognize the enlightened path, which is very deep, subtle and hard to grasp. However, Brahmā Sahampati advises that at least some beings will understand this path, which makes the attempt to teach Dhamma worthwhile in itself. The Buddha eventually came around and agreed to teach the same. (Hirakawa & Groner, 2007).

The Sangha's democratic character and its traditions influenced the different forms of administration of the village as per the picture drawn in the Vinaya Piṭaka. From the Buddha's guidance to kings and people stated in the Pali Canon, we can arguably derive a political philosophy of a sort. (Joshi, 2007)

## **GOVERNANCE AND LAW**

Governance is the process of overseeing or guiding the direction and control of anybody - it may be a country or any organization. When there is talk about governance in Buddhist times, it tends to be associated with a form of government or authority that exists to maintain law and order in a kingdom or society. The foremost Buddhist texts, the Tipiṭaka, contain many references to discourses about governance, policies, rulers, and war. Later Buddhist texts, likewise contain advice to kings about warnings about avoiding arrogance, governance and not ignoring common people's needs. Specifically, Suvarnabhasottama Sūtra put forward the duties of a righteous king. In the realm of governance and politics, Buddhism has influenced monarchs, governments and is seen as a source of their legitimacy and authority. This is specifically applicable for many countries like India, Burma, Tibet, China, Thailand etc

*“Our ancient kings considered hitherto the practise of virtue as their only duty; they knew how to rule without being severe and honoured the Three Jewels; they governed and helped the world, and were happy if men practised righteousness. For myself I desire respectfully, in concert with the son of heaven, to magnify the Good Law in order to save beings from the evil of continued existence (in saṃsāra).”*

*Letter sent to the Chinese emperor*

*by King Mānasam of Ceylon in 423 A.D*

### ***Kingship and Democracy***

During the Buddha's era around the 6th Century BCE, there were two prominent kinds of governments that find mention: one with supremacy originating from the King - the absolute monarchy.

Another one was the classic oligarchy, where a group of monarchs holding various ranks in the government were supreme. Stories of monarchs have been mentioned in the 45 volumes of Tipitaka of the Pali Canon. These are about the two different kinds of government.

The monarchy government had kings such as the famous King Bimbisara (558 BC – 491 BC), the King of the Rajagaha City in the Magadha Country and King Pasenadi (BCE 534 - undocumented), the King of Savatthi in the Kosala country. The oligarchy government also had The Licchavi Kings (400 to 750 CE) as well as the Malla King (1201 to 1779) as disciples of Lord Buddha. All kings mentioned above followed Buddhism and also asked to be Buddha's disciples. After listening to the Dhamma, they turned out to be popular, beloved and good kings among their people who also had happy and good lives.

Since the present world has focused on the government that allows the social order of standardisation, the type of government that is considered the best is then the one that leads to social participation by all sections. Therefore to date, people believe that democracy will be the best type of government so the people tend to choose either presidential democracy or direct democracy or parliamentary democracy to fit their own country.

In the Tipiṭaka, ideas about good governance are framed in terms of the Cakkavatti's ideal, the king who rules according to Dhammanon; non-violently and righteously. His roles and duties are extensively discussed, especially in the Cakkavatti-sihanada Sutta and Mahasudassana Sutta. The Cakkavatti must have enough spiritual merit and wisdom and must be a moral example to the people. It is through this that is described to significantly affect the entire society's moral values. This is how he earns his sovereignty, as opposed to simply inheriting it.

Therefore, it is implied that if we would like to have a good democratic government in any country, then every citizen would have to apply the Dhammadhipateyya to conform to this form of government. According to Ashoka, the Dhamma was based on religious tolerance, kindness towards the needy and old, respect and care for elders, truthfulness and purity, and no killing of animals. The 13th Rock Edict of Maski encourages “dhammavijaya instead of digvijaya” i.e, a conquest by dharma instead of violence. Major Rock Edict III states that as per King's dictate Pradesikas (head of the districts), Yuktas (subordinate officers) and Rajukas (rural administrators) toured every 5 years, to propagate Dhamma. Ashoka was a proponent of non-violence and gave up war due to Buddha's dhamma teachings. For this consideration, each person should have one's own life with Dhamma attainment, accepting each other's potentiality and also giving up all defilements namely conceit, craving and false theory. These will help everybody live peacefully and happily together. (Age of Nandas and Mauryas, 1967)

Major Rock Edict VI eludes to the relationship between the king and his subjects, through Dhamma-Mahamattas. The mahamattas are told to make their reports about the people, to the king at any time, irrespective of where he is or affairs he is occupied with. The Pativedakas (officials bringing news) had access to the king at any time. (Age of Nandas and Mauryas, 1967)

The ideal ruler is known as the "Celestial Wheel–turning king," and is described as the Dīgha-Nikāya 3.62. He uses his authority to promote security and righteousness.

### **Economics**

As economics plays an important role for the majority of people, a number of Buddhist teachings with respect to wealth have great relevance in today's world, especially in its acquisition and its production.

The overall context of Buddha's teachings takes account of issues such as social debasement aggravated by employment, poverty, savings, expenditure, investment, livelihood, resources, income and the integrity and structure of morality. These are interlinked deeply with the economic principles. Through these teachings that are welfare-oriented, they are regarded as the birthplace of modern welfare economics. They relate directly to the study of income distribution and economic efficiency and assess how these factors affect overall well-being. The ideal of harmonious coexistence lies at the core, as per Anguttara Nikāya 2.95, which emphasizes a person's right to pursue wealth but not at the other's expense. (Singh, Vijaya Laxmi, 164, 2003)

Buddhism is one religion that attempts to develop spirituality through moral and ethical cultivation. These ethical and moral standards should govern the functioning of daily life. In the same light, all our social and economic exchanges should also be guided by moral and pure ethics. The Andha Sutta of the Anguttara Nikaya (AN.3.29) discusses this (Singh, Vijaya Laxmi, 164, 2003):

*“Ayaṃ kho tena Bhagavatā jānatā passatā arahatā sammā-sambuddhena, ekāyano ayaṃ maggo sammadakkhāto, sattānaṃ visuddhiyā, soka-paridevānaṃ samatikkamāya, dukkha-domanassānaṃ atthaṅgamāya, nāyassa adhiḅgamāya, nibbānassa sacchikiriyāya, yadidaṃ cattāro satipatthānā.”*

“Bhikkhus, there are these three kinds of persons found existing in the world. Which three? The blind person, the one-eyed person, and the two-eyed person” (Bodhi 2012, 224).

“As the Sutra explains that the first type is the blind person, he who does not have the eyes to see how to acquire new wealth, nor how to increase what he already has. This blind person also does not have the eyes to see the ethics of wholesomeness and unwholesomeness. The second one is the one-eyed person who has the eye only for acquiring wealth and increasing it. He doesn't have the eye to see the ethics of wholesomeness and unwholesomeness, which means that he can create and increase wealth but he does not cultivate ethics. The last one is the two-eyed person, who has both eyes - one to acquire wealth and another eye for acquiring ethics and wisdom. In other words, this two-eyed person can cultivate both wealth as well as good faith and conduct”.

### **Social Order**

In a society where Brahmins had higher status and authority, Buddhism challenged the very structure of Indian society. More broadly, it challenged the deep-rooted caste system as gaining enlightenment was not only limited to those of upper castes in the Buddhist world order. They also allowed women into monastic life, thereby providing roles to them, outside of the home.

S Radhakrishnan, the President of India from 1962 to 1967, observed that Buddha adopted the Upanishadic view that the Ideal Human Being or the Brahmin (not a type of caste) by character, not so much by birth: “Not by birth is one a Brahmin, not by birth is one an outcast; by deeds is one a Brahmin, by deeds, is one an outcast”.

The whole Buddhist religious life is centred around the 'Order of Disciplines' - the sanghas as they are known. Buddhist communities give due importance to their religion, viewing it as an organised way of presenting their teachings, and not as a social structure or hierarchy.

But Buddhism as a religion has always been flexible. As it spread more, the newer versions of Buddhism that emerged met the various needs of new converts. In Mahayana Buddhism (meaning "the great vehicle"), people are allowed to aspire towards enlightenment or nirvana even if they couldn't become monks. Over time Mahayana Buddhism organically grew into becoming the most widely known form of Buddhism. Essentially, Buddhism's outright rejection of the erstwhile discriminatory caste system and the middle path's flexibility is what helped it spread across Asia.

### **Criminal Code & Law**

The influence of Buddhism on law and political systems has been very profound. Based on the cultural and historical origins, comparative law divides the legal systems into families or various types, for example, Hindu law, Islamic law, Talmudic law and Biblical law. In the category of the various religious legal systems, Buddhist law is the most recent one, reignited in the early 20th century.

Buddha's teachings rely primarily on eradicating superstition and useless social practices through reason (takka) and analysis (vibhajja) and seeing the facts of life as they are (yathabhuta-dassana), rather than being preoccupied with otherworldly goals. Basic Buddhist principles, rules and reasoning processes may influence law as they are employed by the community that uses the legal system. Thus, a country may impose a strong socialist law code, upon a population whose culture reasons through Buddhist principles, for example, the Russian-imported Mongolian codes in force between 1924 and 1992. In most of its decision making, the Tibetan government continues to leverage Buddhist reasoning and principles. (The Reception of Buddhist Law in Southeast Asia, 200 B.C.E.–1860 C.E.)

Based on the principle of ahimsa “non-harming”, which is referred to in Pāli and Sanskrit, the five precepts are upheld (Dhamma-Cakkappavattana Sutta, Dhamma Talks).

*“Mayaṃ bhante, ti-saraṇena saha pañca sīlāni yācāma.*

*Venerable Sir, we request the Three Refuges & the Five Precepts.*

*Pāṇātipātā veramaṇī sikkhā-padaṃ samādiyāmi.*

*I undertake the training rule to refrain from taking life.*

*Adinnādānā veramaṇī sikkhā-padaṃ samādiyāmi.*

*I undertake the training rule to refrain from stealing.*

*Kāmesu micchācārā veramaṇī sikkhā-padaṃ samādiyāmi.*

*I undertake the training rule to refrain from sexual misconduct.*

*Musāvādā veramaṇī sikkhā-padaṃ samādiyāmi.*

*I undertake the training rule to refrain from telling lies.*

*Surā-meraya-majja-pamādaṭṭhānā veramaṇī sikkhā-padaṃ samādiyāmi.”*

*I undertake the training rule to refrain from intoxicating liquors & drugs that lead to heedlessness.*

Pali Canon recommends a person not to hurt others based on the recommendation to compare themselves with other persons. The foundation of the precepts is formed on the value of compassion and a belief in karmic retribution (Dhamma-Cakkappavattana Sutta, Dhamma Talks, N.D. ).

*“Imāni pañca sikkhā-padāni:*

*These are the five training rules.*

*Sīlena sugatiṃ yanti.*

*Through virtue they go to a good destination.*

*Sīlena bhoga-sampadā.*

*Through virtue is wealth attained.*

*Sīlena nibbutiṃ yanti.*

*Through virtue they go to unbinding.*

*Tasmā sīlaṃ viśodhaye.”*

*Therefore we should purify our virtue.*

There have been many revival movements in recent times, wherein the traditional Buddhist countries have been at the forefront to advance the five precepts. The precepts play a very influential role in the Buddhist organizations by having integrated the mindfulness training programs, particularly in the West. Though many experts of mindfulness are not supportive of this completely because of the religious impression of the precepts. Apart from that, the precepts are also extensively used in many conflict prevention and resolution programs.

## **TOLERANCE AND BUDDHISM**

“Tolerance is the quality of being patient, accepting, and forgiving”. As per the Declaration of Principles on Tolerance by UNESCO on 16 Nov 1995, United Nations states “Tolerance is respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world's cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human. It is fostered by knowledge, openness, communication, and freedom of thought, conscience and belief. Tolerance is harmony in difference”

Buddha said, “Peace comes from within. Do not seek it without.” It means that a negative state of mind and anger are the cause of wars in the world. Buddhists believe that people can indeed live in harmony if we abandon negative emotions from our minds and focus on positive emotions like compassion and love. (Sigalovada Sutta)

### **Religious Tolerance**

In Buddhism, tolerance is a manifestation of inclusiveness as also propagated in Hinduism. This accepts every



cult, for example, the cults of stones, natural forces, the cult of one God and many Gods, down to the very cult of the individual's divine nature.

According to Rigveda 1.164.46, the Hindu religion recognizes all gods as being the manifestations of one divine, universal ground. In 12th Major Edict of Aśoka, we read: "On each occasion, one should honour another man's sect, for by doing so one increases the influence of one's own sect and benefits that of the other man; while by doing otherwise one diminishes the influence of one's own sect and harms the other man's". This is also referred to, in the Thapar, R. 1998 publication, Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas.

Tolerance for Buddhists does not include converting the non-Buddhists by force. As pointed out by Buddhist monk and scholar Walpola Rahula: "the spirit of tolerance and understanding had been from the beginning one of the most cherished ideals of Buddhist culture and civilization. That is why there is not a single example of persecution or the shedding of a drop of blood in converting people to Buddhism, or in its propagation during its long history of 2500 years."

Buddhism easily adapts to the country's existing circumstances. It adapted smoothly to Hinduism in India, Confucianism in China, the cults of spirits in South-Eastern Asia and Taoism, Tibetan B'on, Japanese Shintō and Shamanism Mongolia. Also, on the same territory under state protection, Buddhism proposes the peaceful coexistence of different religions. (Archi-Cultural Translations through the Silk Road, 2012)

Buddhists have always shown remarkable tolerance towards other religions: "Buddhist tolerance springs from the recognition that the dispositions and spiritual needs of human beings are too vastly diverse to be encompassed by any single teaching, and thus that these needs will naturally find expression in a wide variety of religious forms." (Bhikkhu Bodhi, "Tolerance and Diversity, N.D.)

The Buddhist king Ashoka (269 – 231 BC) declared religious tolerance:

*"The faiths of others all deserve to be honoured for one reason or another. By honouring them, one exalts one's own faith and at the same time performs a service to the faith of others." (Towards a Buddhist Policy of Tolerance: the case of King Ashoka" in Jacob Neusner, p. 323)*

### **Amity**

The Buddha differed radically from the Hindu view that *Matsya Nyāya* is the basic law of nature. Buddha was not impervious to the struggle for existence as it was very evident in everyday life. However, rather than attributing this to his innate depravity, Buddha attributed it to man's ignorance. The Blessed One also saw that if the man was properly guided, then he would readily live in harmony with others around, willing to cooperate with others and even sacrifice himself for the sake of others. In the Buddha's view, it was the self-understanding and inward discipline that was necessary to control man, not discipline imposed from above or external authority.

Even in the jungle, the law of the jungle was not universal. There was cooperation and amity even amongst the animals as referred to, in the several Jātaka stories.

### **Social**

The Buddha also preached about kindness, compassion, non-violence, loving others and tolerance. He encouraged men not to abhor other religions or belittle them. He said that unless one found his teachings to be in accordance with one's own reasoning, one should not even accept his own teachings. This has been captured in the Kalama Sutta.

*"Katamā ca sā bhikkhave majjhimā paṭipadā Tathāgatena abhisambuddhā,  
Cakkhu-karaṇī ñāṇa-karaṇī upasamāya abhiññāya sambodhāya nibbānāya saṃvattati."  
And what is the middle way realized by the Tathāgata that—producing vision, producing knowledge—leads to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to unbinding?*

*"Ayaṃ-eva ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo,  
Seyyathidaṃ, Sammā-diṭṭhi sammā-saṅkappo,  
Sammā-vācā sammā-kammanto sammā-ājīvo,  
Sammā-vāyāmo sammā-sati sammā-samādhi."  
Precisely this noble eightfold path: right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.*

Buddhism believed that a society that integrates freedom as a concept rather than suppression and repression will inevitably be characterised by tolerance. That is what the profound philosophy of this religion was - permitting the human will an unrestricted opportunity to perfect itself.

The Buddha showed substantial admiration for the Licchavis, the rulers of the Mithila Region in Northern Bihar. In the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, he equated the Licchavis to Tāvātimsadeva - The Thirty-Three Gods. When he spoke to Vassakāra, minister of King Ajātasattu, he warned that as long as they adhered to the seven rules of a nation's welfare (Aparihāniya Dhamma), the Vajjis would remain unconquerable.

*“Yāvakīvañ-ca bhikkhave bhikkhū, abhiñha-sannipātā bhavissanti sannipāta-bahulā, vuddhiyeva bhikkhave bhikkhūnam pātikanhā no parihāni.”*

These were as follows - Concord in action, frequent consultation meetings, adherence to injunctions and traditions, respect for women, respecting elders, honour for places of worship within the territory and outside and protection of worthy saints. The Buddha guided further stating “So long as the Vajjis meet frequently in council, assemble and disperse in 22 harmonies (and observe the other rules of welfare), their prosperity is to be expected, not their decline.”

## II. CONCLUSION

This research shows to what extent historical developments from the early era indicate the complementary, sometimes antagonistic interaction of Buddhism and Democracy. In parts of the Asian world, where Buddhism is the religion for the majority of the population, it continues to play a very eminent role with consequences for national politics. Whether it is viewed historically or with regards to the current circumstances, Buddhism cannot be delinked from Democracy as it is so closely associated with cultural standards and ideologies.

Although Buddhism is not primarily apprehensive about political systems or even social reform, one does marvel at the scriptures and guidance that are referred to the many scholarly works across academic bodies, for the specificity of the governance practises to be adopted at an individual, societal level that can be leveraged upon. From Equality, Social Reforms to Tolerance are the very basis of a mature civilization and the many parallels between the Buddhist principles and democracy encourage us to take the teachings forward by way of understanding and utilising them to the fullest.

Adapting to the dynamic circumstances over time, Buddhism has sought to both guard and develop its place in the world. The interaction between Buddhism and political principles still resonates in the world at the beginning of the 21st Century, hence the principles of Buddhism must be leveraged to promote a secular and value-based world.

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