

Democracy on Buddhistic Approach

Panya Klaydesh*

Sukit Chaimusik**

Pachabodee Yaemsoonthorn***

Abstract

This article describes the Buddhist principle compatible with the democratic principle. Interpretation of Buddhism and democracy is more generally attempted to describe in the same accord to assure that Buddhism will be accepted compatible with the current modern government. There are two compatible characteristics as

1. The democratic principle of the Buddhist monastic community: 1) Government of the Bhikkhus, by the Bhikkhus, for the Bhikkhus 2) All Bhikkhus are equal under the law (Dhamma and Vinaya) 3) All Bhikkhus can participate to comment and advise the Sangha 4) Decision-making by all Bhikkhus

2. The democratic principles in the Buddhist teaching which are similar to Democratic principle nowadays as 1) People Participation 2) Equality 3) Freedom 4) Majority.

Keywords: Democracy, Buddhistic Approach

1. Introduction

Democracy is currently accepted by a wide range of people around the world. It is also supported by several scholars as the best government. The principle of

democracy is widely utilized and extended into the religious beliefs in two manners: 1) contradictory to the religious principle -- the democratic principle denies the religious concept, incompatible with any

* Assistant Professor., Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Khonkaen Campus

** Associate Professor., Graduate School, Mahamakut Buddhist University

*** Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Khonkaen Campus



democratic principle, and 2) consistent with the religious principle -- the religious principle is harmoniously interpreted in line with the democratic principle to assure that it is the world's best principle of government. Similarly, this article describes the Buddhist principle compatible with the democratic principle. Even though Buddhism has not directly indicated democracy since it came after for a long time, the Buddhist concept and principle are partly compatible with the democratic principle.

2. Meaning and concept of Democracy

The origins of the term democracy can be traced back to Ancient Greece. Like other words ending with 'cracy'(for example, autocracy, aristocracy and bureaucracy), democracy is derived from the Greek word Kratos, meaning power, or rule. Democracy thus means 'rule by the demos'; (the demos referring to 'the people', although the Greeks originally used this to mean 'the poor' or 'the many'). Plato and Aristotle in Ancient Greece viewed democracy as a system of rule by the masses at the expense of wisdom and property.

Although often used interchangeably, the terms democracy and republic are not

synonymous. Both systems delegate the power to govern their elected representatives. In a republic, however, these officials are expected to act on their own best judgment of the needs and interests of the country. The officials in a democracy more generally and directly reflect the known or ascertained views of their constituents, sometimes subordinating their own judgment.

Ideas that have kindled the struggle for democracy in the modern world are the rights of man and the dignity of the individual which have expressed this attitude. In this sense, the history of democracy records the growth in scope of man's sense of moral concern. Moreover, this democratic moral sense generally implies something about not only the goals that man should seek but also the spirit in which they seek them. A man of democratic temper will pursue human welfare, but he will not do so in a context of rigid ranks and hierarchies. For he seeks more than the improvement of man's material condition, he seeks their development of man's material condition; he seeks their development as independent individuals and their entrance as full participants into the enterprises of their community. To believe in democracy is to



wish to help individuals by giving them the tools to help themselves.¹

Democracy gives so much freedom to the individual and leaves so much to his powers of judgment and self-discipline; it depends more than most other forms of government on an unspoken atmosphere and on the willing allegiance of most of its citizens to certain moral principles. A democratic form of government may exist in a society where this atmosphere and moral outlook are weak or still in the process of development. But in any society where democratic government can be said to be reasonably safe, certain attitudes will be deeply ingrained and certain ideals will be widely shared.² Most conceptions of democracy are based on the principle of ‘government by the people’. This implies that, in effect, people govern themselves which they participate in making the crucial decisions that structure their lives and determine the fate of their society. This participation can take a number of forms. However, in the case of direct democracy, popular participation entails direct and

continuous involvement in decision-making, through devices such as referendum, mass meeting, or even interactive television. The alternative and more common form of democratic participation is the act of voting, which the central feature of what is usually called representative democracy. When citizen vote, they do not so much make the decisions that structure their own chosen lives that will make those decision on their behalf. What gives voting its democratic character, however is that, if the election is competitive, it empowers the public to ‘kick the rascal out’, and it thus makes politicians publicly accountable.

Perhaps a more helpful starting point from which to consider the nature of democracy is Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, delivered in 1864 at the height of the American Civil War. He extolled the virtues of what he called “government of the people, by the people, and for the people”. This have made clear that democracy links government to the people. The precise nature of democratic rule has been the subject of severe ideological and political

¹ Rockefeller Brothers Fund, Inc., **The Power of the Democratic Idea**, (Bombay : Popular Prakasshan, 1967), p. 2.

² Ibid., p. 1.



debate. Whether or not this definition describes the political process in so-called Western democracies is a matter of opinion. Democracy is an emotive term which too many implies the freedom of the individual to participate in those decisions which affect his life. This suggests that the individual should be directly and regularly involved in the political process. Only then will the ideal of government by the people become a reality. However, from a pluralist perspective, there is no inconsistency between democracy and the exclusion of the majority from active participation in the political process. From this viewpoint, democracy is seen as a system of representative government whereby a plurality of elites represents the range of interests in society. The pluralist perspective therefore implies that representative government is the only way the democratic ideal can be realized in contemporary society.³ As a saying of the former American President, John F. Kennedy had been said at his oath-taking ceremony for presidency in 1961 “Ask not what your country

can do for you ask what you can do for your country.” This is the reminder for citizens to have recognition of their duties on their rights which are concept of democratization.

However, the simple notion of ‘rule by the people’ does not get us very far. In Bernard Crick’s word, “democracy is perhaps the most promiscuous word in the world of public affairs”. A term that can mean anything to anyone is in danger of meaning nothing at all. Amongst the meanings that have been attached to the word ‘democracy’ is follows:⁴

1. a system of rule by the poor and disadvantaged.
2. a form of government in which the people rule themselves directly and continuously, without the need of professional politicians or public officials.
3. a society based on equal opportunity and individual merit, rather than hierarchy and privilege.
4. a system of welfare and redistribution aimed at narrowing social inequalities.

³ Michael Haralambos and Robin Heald, **Sociology Themes and Perspectives**, (New Delhi : Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 135.

⁴ Andrew Heywood, **Politics**, (New York : Palgrave, 2002), p. 68.



5. a system of decision making based on the principle of majority rule.

6. a system of rule that secures the rights and interest of minorities by placing check upon the power of the majority.

7. a mean of filling public offices through a competitive struggle for the popular vote.

8. a system of government that serve the interest of the people regardless of their participation in political life.

The phrase ‘rule of the people’ may define democratic principle is best viewed as a mosaic, the element of which, by themselves, or in variety of combinations with each other, generate different models of democracy. The model of democracy, in each case, depends upon which principles are combined and, among them, which are privileged. Thus, freedom and equality are identified as the central justificatory principles of democracy, and autonomy as the principle underpinning both, it is particularly combinations of all (or some) of them, and the dominant role played by anyone in this combination, which contribute to the construction of particular

model of democracy.⁵

3. Democracy in Buddhism

Main characteristic of democratic system is the people in a state are equal under the law although they have the right and freedom under the limitation by law. Democracy is not best political system but is better than other systems in present. Buddhism is not democracy but some of its feature is similar. We can study and analyze the similarity of both democracy and Buddhism.

When we consider the Buddhism in a point of democratic view, it can be considered into two scopes as:

1. In narrow sense, we can consider only in the Sangha community.

2. In broader sense, we can consider generally in Buddhist teaching.

3.1 Democracy and Sangha community.

Sangha is the Buddhist monastic community, everybody when they joined this religion, they have been under same governing like all rivers fall into the sea. When we consider Sangha society in a

⁵ Niraja Gopa Uyal (Ed), **Democracy in India**, (New Delhi : Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 9.



point of democratic view, it can conclude as follows:

1. Government of the Bhikkhus, by the Bhikkhus, for the Bhikkhus.

It appears that the rules of discipline of the Buddhist Sangha, create a well-knit system of Democracy. The Buddhist Sangha represents a system of government formed by the Bhikkhus, for the Bhikkhus, and of the Bhikkhus. This is democracy in the form as well as in the spirit. The pattern which is represented as being laid down by the Buddha for the regulation of affairs of the Sangha has been described as democratic, because there is no monarchical head, no authoritarian chain of command and responsibility and because a recognized procedure exists for decision-making by the whole community corporately.

The prevalence of laws of community points towards the existence of democracy. It was derived from evolution and experience of Sangha affairs. The procedure of enacting law was based on the fact that if there was some wrong action, it was taken to the assembly of the Sangha by some Bhikkhus. There would be discussions

concerning the evil of such actions. Finally, the Buddha, when he was alive, recommended and followed it as the central regulation. It thus became an act of laws.

Such a law the Buddha, before his passing away, gave the right of amendment. He said, “when I am gone, Ananda, let the order, if it should so wish, abolish all the lesser and minor precepts.”⁶ It is a right representing great freedom for the member of a society to be able to change, cut or add laws to suit their conduct. How prophetic was Buddha when he realized that static laws cannot serve the purpose of a changing society. The very amendment-making process in a modern constitution is based on this assumption.

The Buddha has given the supreme power of decision making to the Sangha. He asked Bhikkhus to take their refuge in themselves and in the Dhamma and not in any external agency. He advised them to attach importance not to the physical body of the Teacher (Buddha) but to his teaching. Therefore, after the Parinibbâna, Ananda was asked by the Magadhan minister, Vassakâra as to who would lead

⁶ Su.DT.M. 10/141/123.



the Sangha thereafter, the former could immediately answer that the monks would be guided by the Dhamma itself. The Buddha has given a democratic organization to the Sangha. The disputes in the Sangha were solved in a democratic manner.⁷ Every Sangha affairs have to be performed by Sangha assembly, which is the combined form of all Bhikkhus for governing all Bhikkhus.

2. All Bhikkhus are equality under the law (Dhamma and Vinaya).

The statement had been mentioned already that the men and women who renounced the world and accepted the Master as their teacher and guide were privileged to feel that they belonged to one and the same brotherhood under a loving father. They came from different social grade, belonged to different

nationalities, spoke different dialects and represented different religious temperaments. A variety of intellect, imagination and spiritual nature were willingly in the common life of a single religious order to pass as Sâkyaputtiya Samanas.⁸ Every member of the Buddhist Sangha has an equal right to lead the holy life in order to attain the highest goal of life—Nibbâna, under the same law. It is well-known that the Buddhist Sangha has various kinds of people from various classes, castes, and families but they are under the same law and order in a new society which supports the spirit of the social equality.

CullavaggaVinayaPitaka refers to equality under the discipline and doctrine:

Just, O Bhikkhus, as the great rivers- that is to say, the Gangâ, the Yamunâ the Aciravatĩ, the Sarabhu, and the Mahĩ - when they have fallen into the great ocean, renounce their name and lineage and are thenceforth reckoned as the great ocean.

Just so, O Bhikkhus, do these four castes – the Khattiyas, the Brahmans, the Vessa and the Suddas- when they have gone forth from the world under the doctrine and discipline proclaimed by the

⁷ S.R.Goyal, **A History of Indian Buddhism**, (Meerat : KusumajaliPrakashan, 1987), pp. 168-169.

⁸ Shobha Mukerji, **The republican trends in Ancient India**, (Delh i : MunshiramManoharlal, 1969), p. 151.



Tathâgata, renounce their names and lineage and enter into the number of the Sakyaputtiya Samanas.⁹

Equality in society was rationalized by the Buddha through the Buddhist Sangha by making the Dhamma (Universal norm) and Vinaya (particular norms for monks) as the central principle of common conduct for every member of such a society.

It can be said that all Bhikkhus are equality under the same law as Dhamma and Vinaya. They can live together by listening and being respectful to the senior monks, particularly to the head of the Sangha (Sanghathera), and they are equality also in the Sangha assembly.

3. All Bhikkhus can participate to comment and advice to the Sangha.

The Buddha allowed all Bhikkhus to advise him, if they thought that his actions were not appropriate. As it appeared in MahapavâranâSutta that when the Buddha had been in residence at PupphâramVihâra with five hundreds of Bhikkhus, he said “Now, O Bhikkhus, I offer

to you, do you have no a fault in my any actions or speaking?”¹⁰ From his speech, it may be said that the Buddha gave the right and freedom to all Bhikkhus to comment and advise or give the suggestion, if they thought that it was wrong, it may be the harmfulness of Sangha. Besides he has allowed all Bhikkhus to advise to each other. It can be well known from Pavârana ceremony. The ceremony of Pavârana was performed at the end of the Vassâvasa (Rain-retreat). It was a solemn conference at which each Bhikkhu requested the assembly to call him to account if they had seen or heard or suspected him to be guilty of any transgression during the period of Vassa.¹¹ This is one of Democratic principle which everybody can participate to comment and advise the Government. All Bhikkhus have freedom under the laws (Dhamma and Vinaya) and they should not take liberties with another’s freedom. They have to consider the virtue of righteousness

⁹ Vi.C. 7/460/18.

¹⁰ Su.S.S. 15/744/231.

¹¹ K.L.Hazra, **Constitution of the Buddhist Sangha**, (New Delhi : B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1988), p. 135.



knowing the cause, the purpose, oneself, moderation, the proper time, the society and the individual.¹²

4. Decision-making by all Bhikkhus.

A system of decision making by majority or popular vote is the main feature of Democracy. But the Buddha did not consider it as main feature. He had allowed Bhikkhus to hold regular and frequent meetings. This meeting had been done in the assembly. Every affair had to be decided by all Bhikkhus. He allowed in some cases to do decision making by the vote of majority as called “Yebhuyyasikā”. This is the one of means for settling disputes. This form was adopted only in a Vivādādhikarana (contention in doctrine and discipline) and only when the matter in issue was of a grave character and the assembly got out of hand and a unanimous decision was found to be impossible. The decision arrived at by the vote of the majority. Thus Buddha’s thought is broader than democracy as the decision-making is done by all not by majority.

4. Democracy and Buddhist teachings

Buddha’s teachings throughout 45

years of his religious propagation had been some aspect of thought and practicing which are similar to Democratic principle in nowadays as follows:

1. People Participation

The Buddha had established new society and his followers had increased. He did not formulate his social formation or structure distinctly. He considered the situation and suitable time before decision-making for something. Religious ceremony and legislation were originated by participation of some Buddhist laymen and disciples who made a significance of ceremony and legislation. When he had considered that it was agreeable to the purpose of monastic legislation, he adopted and laid down the suitable practice appropriately. But if it did not agree to, he would reject that recommendation also. For example, the Buddha, when people censured his disciples who traveled at any time unlike other ascetics who resided in rainy season, had allowed Vassāvāsa (Rain-retreat) ceremony following traditional culture. He borrowed the custom of Uposatha from the Brāhmanical society at the suggestion

¹² Su.Dī.Pā. 11/331/114; Su.A.Satta. 23/65/114.



of Bimbisâra, King of Magadha.¹³ etc. It can be said that the Buddha adopted people participation to give some suggestion and protestation from his government.

2. Equality.

The teaching of the Buddha was not only for the few. It was meant for all—the high, the low, the rich, the poor, the wise, and the ignorant, the noble-mind, and the immoral without any distinction. The Buddha rejected the concept of social status determined by birth, colour or wealth. On the contrary, he determined by

the qualities of human beings on the basis of their actions or conduct.

Buddhism has adopted human beings' equality—prestige, opportunity, right, action, speech and thought. Everybody have right and equality to attain the ultimate goal—Nibbâna. The Buddha has refused the caste system because it does not stipulate the worth of humanity, but Kamma (action) stipulates. If each man in each caste did a meritorious deed, they could achieve the heaven equally.

No caste or class can be absolved from Kamma as Buddha said that;

Not by birth does one become an outcast, not by birth does one become a Brâhmana; by deeds one becomes an outcast, by deeds one become a Brâhmana.¹⁴

Otherwise, the Buddha believed in the social equality of both sexes—men and women. He was prepared to accept differences between man and man, but based not on heredity; for this, he relied on the criterion of wisdom, deeds and virtue. In the pre-Buddhist days the status of women in India was on the whole low and without

honour, during the Buddhist epoch there was a change. Women came to enjoy more equality and greater respect and authority than ever hitherto accorded them.¹⁵ He said that “man does not be clever in any time, but woman is clever too”.¹⁶ Thus, Buddhism adopted equality of everybody in the way of life. The Buddha considered

¹³ S.R.Goyal, *A History of Indian Buddhism*, (Meerat : KusumajaliPrakashan, 1987), p. 157.

¹⁴ Su.Kh.Su. 25/383/342.

¹⁵ S.R.Goyal, *A History of Indian Buddhism*, (Meerat : KusumajaliPrakashan, 1987), p. 292.

¹⁶ Su.Khu.J. 28/1142/26.



the equality in the mind which was deeper than the equality in democracy which emphasized to the equality under the law.

3. Freedom

Buddha had taught human beings to free from all impurities on the basis of wisdom. The ultimate goal of Buddhism is Nibbāna. When human beings attained the ultimate goal—Nibbāna, then they had freedom and absent from all ignorance.

In Buddhism, one is supposed to be aware of the three root causes of suffering: greed, hatred and delusion. There are great barriers to openness, compassion and responsibility in short, to the Buddhist conception of freedom, which is threefold. First, all people should be free from insecurities and dangers that threaten their existence such as poverty, disease, famine, etc. Second is social freedom, all people should be free from human oppression and exploitation: and at last the freedom of the inner life. This means the freedom from mental suffering, from impurities of the mind that propel people to commit all kinds of evils.

Buddhism gives the freedom for all

in action, speech and thought. The Buddha confirmed that human beings had own way of life without being controlled by outside. He taught the principle of Kamma and result of Kamma that the destiny of man does not come from supernatural beings but from his own actions. He said “According to the seed that sown, so is the fruit ye reap these from. Doer of good will gather. Doer of evil, evil reaps.”¹⁷

Besides the freedom in action, Buddhism has freedom in thought. The Buddha did not coerce anybody to have faith without reasons. He emphasized that the person should have faith and wisdom simultaneously; he had taught the principle of faithfulness as called “Kâlâmasutta-Kankhâniyatthâna” which advised on how to investigate a doctrine, as contained in the Kâlâmasutta. There are ten elements as following:

1. Be not led by report
2. Be not led by tradition.
3. Be not led by hearsay.
4. Be not led by the authority of texts.
5. Be not led by mere logic.
6. Be not led by inference.
7. Be not led by considering

¹⁷ Su.S.S. 15/903/274.



appearance.

8. Be not led by the agreement with a considered and appeared theory.

9. Be not led by seeming possibilities.

10. Be not led by the idea, “this is our teacher”.

When understood and known by themselves that those doctrines are good or bad, blemished or unblemished etc., they should reject or follow that doctrine.¹⁸ Thus, Buddhism adopts the freedom of everybody under the law of action. Everyone can act, speak and think without being controlled by anyone.

4. Majority

The rule of majority is a method in democracy. The majority as the ruler or the administrator governs the state while the minority as the opponent checks the operation of rulers or administrators. In the Buddhist monastic community, the monastic government also used the principle of majority, for instance, the sentence of the disciplinary case of dispute. The weakness of majority was sometimes not beneficial for the public. For example, Venerable Devadatta, a notorious monk in the Bud-

dha’s lifetime, received precious robes from faithful people, but later, he was finally blamed. This means that the majority is beneficial, but it is not always beneficial. It mainly depends upon the quality of people.

Besides, there are other Buddhist principles with compatible characteristics with democracy. For example, the principle of compromise is the procedure for covering over with grass, called Tinavatthâra. When there is a conflict in a party, a group, or an organization, any case will increase violence or lead to schism if anyone is sentenced guilty. So, the procedure of a reconciliation of both parties without need for clearing up the rights and wrongs is allowed. The Buddha has taught his monks a moderate path, not too tight and not too loose, and he has taught his monks to mutually depend on each other as in Singâlasutta.¹⁹ The Buddha has taught the interpersonal relationship, too. As seen, the western democracy is based on a certain religion’s teaching whereas the eastern democracy is conceptualized from the religion, especially Buddhism, and stressed

¹⁸ SU.A.Ti. 20/505/241.

¹⁹ Su.Dî.Pâ. 11/198/206-206.



on the supremacy of righteousness. It is “the moderate democracy, so-called Polity, which is the middle way system without aggression and violence and the system of compromise.”²⁰

5. Conclusion

Interpretation of Buddhism and democracy is more generally attempted to describe in the same accord to assure that Buddhism will be accepted compatible with the current modern government.

According to the author, Buddhism has a neutral view of government and does not focus on any certain concepts of government. Importantly, the Buddhist government of the Buddhist monastic community is based on the supremacy of righteousness (Dhammâdhipateyya), which is significantly regarded as the righteous principle of government. Thus, whichever regime is dependent upon the supremacy the righteousness is accepted in accordance with the Buddhist principle.

References

1. English

(I) Secondary Data

Mahamakut Buddhist University. **Tipitaka Vol.7, 10,11,15,20,25,28**. Bangkok : Mahamakut Buddhist University’s publishing, 1982.

(II) Primary Data

(1) Book :

Andrew Heywood. **Politics**. New York : Palgrave. 2nd Edition, 2002.

K. L. Hazra. **Constitution of the Buddhist Sangha**. New Delhi : B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1988.

Michael Haralambos and Robin Heald. **Sociology Themes and Perspectives**. New Delhi : Oxford University Press, 2004.

Niraja GopalJoyal (Ed). **Democracy in India**. New Delhi : Oxford University Press, 2001.

²⁰ PrayongSuwanbubpha, **Political Philosophy in the East and West**, (Bangkok : O.S.Printing House, 1998), p. 314.



- Prayong Suwanbubpha. **Political Philosophy in the East and West.** Bangkok : O.S. Printing House, 1998.
- Rockefeller Brothers Fund. **The Power of the Democratic Idea.** Bombay : Popular Prakasshan Inc., 1967.
- S.R.Goyal. **A History of Indian Buddhism.** Meerat : Kusumajali Prakashan, 1987.
- ShobhaMukerji. **The republican trends in Ancient India.** Delhi : Munshiram Manoharlal, 1969.
- Ven. Phradhammpitaka (P.A.Payautto). **Creation of Democracy.** Bangkok : Educational Technique Department Ministry of Education, 2001.