

## **Human Rights from a Buddhist Perspective**

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In the document *Towards a Global Ethic*, endorsed at the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago, we notice that many ideas, which belong to a base generally shared by all the religions, can be considered significant in supporting a universal agreement and respect of human rights.

Buddhism, as religion and as philosophy, was conceived over 2,500 years ago, in an ancient India in which a rigid social hierarchy and a set of foreordained life phases were subduing and ruling over all human beings. But in that very situation, Buddha's ideas on man and society were asserting the necessity to consider the lives of other beings as indissolubly linked with our lives, and our spiritual and mental development rooted in an indispensable respect for other beings' pursuit of happiness and spiritual evolution.

We do not find any clear statements of human rights in the texts of the Pāli canon or in the Sanskrit works and in their Tibetan or Chinese translations. But we should remember that Buddha very often gives apophatic (and not cataphatic) definitions of his concepts, and in the texts we have many symbolical, metaphorical, and allegorical explanations; probably we need to detect the notion of human rights hidden behind other ideas.

In this regard we should consider the role played by the fundamental moral precepts in Buddhism, i.e., do not kill, do not steal, do not lie, and so on: they are the guidelines for correct human behavior. We can say that they imply the presence of a right to life, a

right to property (even if without attachment), a right to truth, and so on. When we read the five main precepts as described in *Suttanipāta* (393-398), we observe that they are not confined into a personal attempt—that sometimes can become egotistic—to lead a morally correct life, but they have a strong social value: **“The lay-disciple should not kill a living being, nor cause to kill, nor allow others to kill. Do not injure any being, either strong or weak, in the world.”** The absence of violence must lead our lives, but it is not enough, according to Buddha’s words: we also cannot delegate other people to commit a crime—staying hidden and passing the buck to someone else—and we cannot allow other human beings to have violent behaviors.

Concerning the idea of “freedom,” it is central in Buddhist thought, and it is absolutely connected with the human condition. A man can have a pitiless attitude, but he is mainly considered endowed with a seed of goodness and light (*Anguttara Nikāya* 1.5.9-10 and 1.6.1-2: “*Luminous, monks, in the mind. And it is defiled by incoming defilements*”), and he is predominantly and naturally able to perform positive actions. We cannot decide the characteristics of men once and for all. Man can be cruel as a wolf (*homo homini lupus*, as said by Thomas Hobbes in his *De Cive. Epistola Dedicatoria*) but also good as a saint, in another condition and in another level of his climb of the spiritual path. We are always free to decide, and man is the only being able to do it. This is a fundamental idea for Buddhism. From a certain point of view men are more than god and more than devil, since we can decide to be good or bad. Buddhism places “man” at the center of the Universe, and the rebirth as man is superior to all other possible rebirths, even the rebirth as god. He is the only being able to decide between good and evil; more than a god, more than a devil. Even the hells are not able to humiliate his freedom, his

rights to the final freedom, since he always has the chance to get again a birth as man and fulfill his destiny, which is the final freedom (*nirvāna*). In Buddhism the hells are not eternal, and even the worst man has always a further possibility to undertake the spiritual path, to climb the mountain of the Dhamma, and reach the *nirvāna* through of his human condition.

Concerning the right of freedom, we can also clearly find evidence in the very life of Buddha: Buddha left his palace with its comfortable life, exercising his rights, as an individual, and renouncing to follow the way of his castes, of his expected social role. Since he wanted to reach his freedom, he could not submit to that society considered an obstacle to his freedom.

But, in recent times, a famous example is given by the Buddhist Burmese monk U Ottama who, during the British rule in Burma, in the 1920s, said that if a man wants to reach the final freedom—*nirvāna*—he has to get worldly freedom before, in his case fighting against the colonialist foreign administration which thwarted the freedom of the Burmese society. Another monk, U Vasara, had done a hunger strike for this reason and finally passed away.

Man has the right to search for freedom, the highest freedom, the *nirvāna*, and he was born with this goal. Nothing can stop, lock, or prevent his destiny, not allowing him to live his life, since nothing can restrain the Universal Law of Dhamma, which rules on the worlds, in the past, in the present, and in the future.

From a linguist point of view, in many Asian cultures we observe that the rights are never separated from the duties, and very often the duties are more highlighted than the rights; the latter are sometimes considered as a “privilege” that can be revoked if we do

not follow the inherent duties. And this is evident in Chinese and Japanese translations of “rights” (Ch. *quanli*, Ja. *Kenri*.), which is similar to the Thai interpretation, *sitthi*, or in the Sanskrit word *adhikāra* used in modern Indian languages, and in Nepalese, to express the idea of “rights.” Concerning this matter, some Western scholars are inclined to believe that the word “due,” denoting both what one is due to do and what is due to one, can be considered more suitable than the word “rights,” since “due” can express both rights and duties.

The dialogue among different cultures on human rights is crucially important since only a deep knowledge of the idea of “human” and “rights” in different societies, religions, and philosophies can produce a fruitful progress of human condition in the world.