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## **A State of Impermanence: Buddhism, Liberalism, and the Problem of Politics**

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A STATE OF IMPERMANENCE:  
BUDDHISM, LIBERALISM, AND THE PROBLEM OF POLITICS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Political Science

by  
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## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation explores the relationship of Buddhist political thought and liberal political thought at the level of first principles. I will examine the tension created by the Buddhist view of political life as instrumental and secondary to man's being as a function of the transition of the Buddhist world into the sphere of Western political life, which views the role of politics as primary to man's nature. In Part I, this will be accomplished through a consideration of the origins of political life and the foundation of the political state in each tradition as viewed through the themes of human nature, the individual, and wisdom. In Part II of this dissertation, I will view the tensions of this transition as a function of contemporary political practice. Here I will address the political history and political thought of Myanmar and consider how these features have contributed to the current humanitarian crisis in the country. I will then examine the contemporary Western political movement of socially-engaged Buddhism. I conclude with a brief consideration of the ways that Buddhist political thought's deflationary understanding of politics can help address the problem of ideology in modern Western political life.

## INTRODUCTION

It has become increasingly clear that the West can no longer continue to view Buddhism and the Buddhist world as simply a foreign curiosity. Practice of Buddhist-inspired “mindfulness” has begun to influence popular culture in Western circles. Abroad, the forces of globalization have brought the Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia into the economic and political sphere of the West. This transition has been punctuated by a humanitarian crisis in Myanmar, pitting citizens of the traditionally Buddhist country against a Muslim “other” who have been denied basic political protections simply on the basis of their ethnic and religious heritage. While many in the West still perceive Buddhism and Buddhist practice as a distant and mystical subject, the realities of a shrinking globe have rendered maintaining this stance a practical impossibility. As the influence of Buddhist politics begins to permeate the political life of the West, an account must be made of the political philosophy which underlies this increasing significant political order.

The situation in Myanmar, and its subsequent condemnation by the United Nations, draws into focus the practical realities of the transition of the Buddhist world into the sphere of Western politics. Though humanitarian crises are by no means a novelty reserved to the Buddhist world, through the lens of Myanmar we can see with clarity the fundamental issues underlying the difficulties of this political transition. The political space that Buddhism is entering is not simply Western, but liberal. Myanmar’s condemnation by the United Nations is premised on their failure to uphold basic standards of human rights. This condemnation supposes that this conception of “human rights” is compelling to Buddhist practitioners on anything more than a practical level. However, the language of rights, or of justice, or of political freedom, is not native to Buddhist political discourse. Though some effort has been made to find natural

analogues between these Western political concepts and Buddhist philosophic ideas, the reality is that the tradition of political thought underlying Buddhist belief and practice is wildly disconnected from that of the Western thought which underlies political institutions like the United Nations and larger political programs like a liberal world order. Since the movement of the Buddhist world into the Western sphere following World War II, there has been an unstated and unexamined assumption that the ability of traditionally Buddhist countries to transition into the world of Western politics should require little more than institutional acts such as joining into Western international political organizations like the United Nations and the World Trade Organization and the reconfiguring of regimes to a more democratic form. Theories of an end of history culminating in a condition of widespread political liberalism make little account of the philosophical realities of the Buddhist world. There seems to have been a belief that as long as Buddhist countries play along with the game, taking on democratic forms of governance and generally respecting liberal principles like free and open elections, that we do not need to dig any deeper into the foundations supporting this transition.

This assumption is flawed. The results of Buddhist practice, on their face, look a lot like liberalism. On one level this would seem to make the transition to the modern liberal state an easier affair. A Buddhist, for example, will not be culturally offended by the idea of women's rights or social welfare programs. But this apparent ease belies a greater trouble. While Buddhism is often in accord with modern liberalism, it does not understand itself to be so on modern liberal terms. Buddhism is in accord with liberalism, but it is not properly liberal. Buddhists can justify liberal action, but they do so not based on claims of rights but on principles such as Buddhist compassion (*karuṇā*). The actions may be the same, but the impetus is decidedly different. In this regard, the apparent congruities between Buddhism and modernity

actually serve to muddy the waters. To happen to agree with liberalism, even if quite frequently, is not to be liberal or to rest on liberal principles.

Liberalism is not merely a political condition or outcome. It is the result of a way of thinking, of approaching not only politics but man himself, and is only justifiable within this context. A political order which apes liberalism in its ends but lacks the philosophic underpinnings which justify these actions is nothing more than an approximation or simulacrum of a liberal politics. While this arrangement can still have tangible political benefits (for example, it is unlikely that newly empowered voters in the Middle East following the Arab Spring or in Myanmar following the recent movement towards democratization cared about the nature of the philosophic justifications which undergirded their new found franchise as a practical concern), it brings with it a particular set of risks (the democratic election of anti-liberal groups like Hezbollah in Egypt and Lebanon, or the harnessing of Buddhist political factions to disenfranchise Muslim voters in Myanmar). As the failures of American military interventionism and nation building in the name of democracy in the early 2000s have shown, liberalism is not simply a set of institutions or a regime type. Though these elements are undoubtedly important, they are a result of liberalism, not a cause of it. These institutions and political practices must be buttressed by the political theory which begat them and justifies their value beyond merely instrumental concerns if they are to constitute a meaningful and lasting political order.

Buddhist political thought is not founded on liberal assumptions. At its core, Buddhist political theory is not defined by its political nature at all but by its connection to the greater Buddhist project. The Western project of political theory places political conceptions as its end, be it liberalism, freedom, or justice. The project of Buddhist political theory does not seek to reach political ends, but spiritual soteriological ends. The goal of the Buddhist political project is



not to understand justice and reconcile it with the human condition, but to craft a political life which can aid in the Buddhist project of enlightenment. Its goal is not to lead towards justice, but to *dhamma*, the truth underlying the Buddha's teachings.

One approach to reconciling this problem has been the attempt to bridge the conceptual divide between the two traditions. Though the language of Western political life is necessarily foreign to the Buddhist tradition, some workable analogues can be found in the Buddhist lexicon. Studies like Damien Keown's attempt to locate an understanding of rights within the Buddhist tradition<sup>1</sup> or Hukam Patyal's association of Western justice with Buddhist *dhamma*<sup>2</sup> are premised on the notion that if a shared base of philosophic concepts can be discovered, the two disparate traditions can be sufficiently reconciled on the matter of first political principles. While this project is undoubtedly undertaken in good faith, its assumptions are more damaging than its proponents acknowledge. The attempt to wrangle a shared philosophic lexicon presumes that both traditions approach the nature of politics and political life from the same ground. In the case of Buddhist political philosophy, this is simply not true. The attempt to discern Western philosophic and political concepts from within the language of the Buddhist tradition fails by assuming that these principles can be understood as political and philosophic apart from being understood as Buddhist. You cannot simply hand-wave away the religious origins of these Buddhist political concepts. If justice must be understood as wholly contained within *dhamma*, then its use as the foundation for a pluralistic, secular liberal order must be called into question. If Buddhist freedom can only be conceptualized as a function of *moksha*, or spiritual liberation, then what value does it have as a universal political principle? Though there is some conceptual

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<sup>1</sup> Keown, Damien. "Are There 'Human Rights' in Buddhism?" *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, 2: 3-27, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Patyal, Hukam Chand. "The Term Dharma: Its Scope." *Bulletin of the Deccan College Research Institute* 54: 157-165. 1994-1995.

overlap in these terms, obscuring their differences serves more to create confusion and a false sense of agreement than to create true clarity. We run the risk of creating dangerous political anachronism when we try to simply plug and play foundational political concepts from one tradition to another. Rather than trying to squint hard enough to view these two traditions as overlapping, we must instead make a sober attempt to view the roots of each and see how they can be reconciled at the level of first principles, each on its own terms.

The ultimate question which must be answered as Buddhist populations enter the sphere of Western political life is whether a state can rightly be both Buddhist and liberal. Can liberal principles be justifiably sustained on Buddhist terms? The proponents of the contemporary Western political movement of socially-engaged Buddhism, built on the attempt to secularize traditional Buddhist practice, maintain that this synthesis is possible. The violent atrocities of the treatment of the Rohingya Muslim population in Myanmar by the country's Buddhist government, undertaken explicitly in the name of Buddhism, seem to indicate that the tension is more real than many in the West would care to acknowledge. The transition of the Buddhist world into the sphere of Western political life requires not only a reconciliation of Buddhism and liberalism, but equally a justification of the very value of political life on Buddhist terms.

### **The Project of this Dissertation**

This dissertation seeks to examine the foundations of political life in Buddhist thought and elucidate the nature of Buddhism's fundamentally deflationary stance towards politics and the political. This will be accomplished through a comparative study, juxtaposing Buddhism's rejection of politics with the primacy placed on the political in the Western tradition. Though the two traditions appear to be discordant at a deep level, seeming to come to disparate conclusions on the ultimate ends of life and society, there are some key themes which underlie the political

thought of both traditions and can serve as a useful avenue in viewing their respective presentations of the nature and value of politics. Primarily, this dissertation will focus on the role of wisdom as a guide to political action in each tradition, as well examining as the foundations upon which each tradition grounds its understanding of the state. Through the lenses of these foundational ideas, this dissertation will seek to explore the roots of Buddhism's relegation of political life, as well as to explain the challenges which Buddhism's political reorientation presents to the politico-centric perspective of the Western tradition.

Beyond an analysis of the roots of Buddhist political thought, this dissertation will further seek to address the larger project being undertaken by both Buddhist scholars and Western Buddhist practitioners to contextualize the premises and philosophic conceptions of Buddhist political thought into a form and language which is able to speak to the Western political tradition. Despite having a tradition predating that of both Christianity and Socrates, the political thought of the Buddha and the Buddhist tradition has largely been ignored in the West.<sup>3</sup> The reasons for this disconnect are likely two-fold, owing both to the historical lack of translations available between the two traditions and the fact that the traditions lack much overlap in philosophic approach or conceptual language. A recent effort has been made by scholars, originating out of both traditions, to rectify this chasm.

The last decade has seen the rise of a new subfield in political science dubbed "comparative political theory."<sup>4</sup> The field is not foreign to political science so much in its methods as in its subject and focus. Comparative political theory harnesses the tools of the study of political theory that have long been used to examine the traditional Western canon but seeks to

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<sup>3</sup> Scholars place the life of the Buddha at 490-410 BCE, though some traditions within Buddhism claim the time to be several centuries earlier. Socrates is believed to have lived from 470-399 BCE. Buddhism is rooted in the Hindu tradition, the beginnings of which are dated at around 1800 BCE.

<sup>4</sup> Dallmayr, Fred R. *Comparative Political Theory: An Introduction*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

broaden the scope of its inquiry to include writings and traditions that have thus far been ignored by traditional Western scholarship. Andrew March, in his article outlining the foundations of comparative political theory as distinct subfield within political science, goes so far as to claim that it isn't a true subfield at all but rather just an opening of new canons to the purview of pre-existing scholarship.<sup>5</sup> Regardless of its standing as a proper sub-field among political scientists, the scholarship taking place by those engaging with the literature of comparative political theory has blossomed over the past decade to the point that the relevancy of the argument has effectively been rendered moot. This dissertation seeks to settle itself among this greater body of literature.

More specifically, this dissertation fits among the more narrowed study of Buddhist political theory. While Buddhist political theory has not received the same level of attention as some non-Western traditions, there is a thoughtful body of literature which is beginning to be developed, spearheaded primarily by Matthew Moore. His 2015 article "Political Theory in Canonical Buddhism"<sup>6</sup> and the subsequently published book expanding the same subject<sup>7</sup> serve as the current standard bearers for scholarship on the relation of the political theory of Buddhism to the Western tradition of political theory. While Moore presents the first wide-lensed, systematic attempt to contextualize Buddhist political thought within the confines of Western scholarship, he also joins and engages with a pre-existing literature which examines Buddhist political thought in light of certain particular facets of Western political philosophy. David Cummiskey offers a historical study of competing understandings of proper rule within Buddhist

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<sup>5</sup> March, Andrew. "What is Comparative Political Theory?" *The Review of Politics* 71: 531-565. 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Moore, Matthew. "Political Theory in Canonical Buddhism." *Philosophy East and West* 65: 36-64. 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Moore, Matthew. *Buddhism and Political Theory*. Oxford, 2016.

thought and seeks to view them in light of Rousseau’s concept of the General Will.<sup>8</sup> Andrew Huxley<sup>9</sup> engages with Steven Collins<sup>10</sup> in a debate on the validity of attempting to read the ancient Pāli text of the *Aggañña Sutta* in light of Western conceptions of the social contract. Matthew J. Walton<sup>11</sup> and Francis Wade<sup>12</sup> each offer attempts to understand the unique political situation of Myanmar, highlighting the apparent disjunction between the Buddhist political principle of compassion and the nation’s recent hazardous experiment in human suffering.

Moore’s work goes beyond these previous studies in attempting not simply to examine a particular feature of Buddhist political thought in light of the tenets of comparative political theory, but instead to begin the work of outlining the totality of the foundations of Buddhist political thought in a way which can then be contextualized within the pre-existing scholarship of Western political theory. He finds three key facets which he believes serve as the fundamental elements of Buddhist political theory: the idea of *anatta* (no-self), the claim that Buddhist ethics is founded on irrealist naturalistic grounds (the understanding that ethical and moral claims are derived from “natural facts of the universe”<sup>13</sup>), and the notion that Buddhism views politics as necessary but relatively unimportant.<sup>14</sup> While this dissertation will necessarily touch on all three of these topics, my focus will be on examining the latter issue, Buddhism’s fundamentally deflationary view of the importance of political life. I choose to examine this characteristic because I believe it to be the most fundamental to an understanding of Buddhist political thought.

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<sup>8</sup> Cummiskey, David. “Comparative Reflections on Buddhist Political Thought: Asoka, Shambhala, and the General Will.” in *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy*. Edited by Steven Emmanuel. Wiley Blackwell, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Huxley, Andrew “The Buddha and the Social Contract.” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 24: 407-420. 1996.

<sup>10</sup> Collins, Steven. “The Lion’s Roar on the Wheel-Turning King: A Response to Andrew Huxley’s ‘The Buddha and the Social Contract.’” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 24: 421-446. 1996.

<sup>11</sup> Walton, Matthew J. *Buddhism, Politics, and Political Thought in Myanmar*. Cambridge University Press, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Wade, Francis. *Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim 'Other'*. Zed Books Ltd, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Moore (2016), Pg 112.

<sup>14</sup> Moore (2016), Pg 9.

While the other two facets may be useful in developing the content to fill out a Buddhist understanding of politics, only the latter addresses the underlying *value* of politics. If politics cannot be demonstrated to be valuable in and of itself on Buddhist terms, then any subsequent conversations about what that politics should entail are rendered mostly moot.

Buddhist political thought in the Pāli Canon (the most ancient texts of the Buddhist tradition, held out to present the direct teachings of the Buddha himself) is presented through three main texts— the *Aggañña Sutta*, the *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta*, and the *Mahāparinibbāṇa Sutta*. These texts, though all direct teachings of the Buddha, seem to prescribe wildly different pictures of the proper political order, sometimes favoring kingship and other times favoring something like republicanism. Taken together these texts present an understanding of political life which, for all its differences, is not entirely foreign to that of the West. Speaking broadly, the texts of the Buddhist tradition (here primarily the *Aggañña Sutta* and the *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta*) gesture towards the natural condition of kingship.<sup>15</sup> The *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta* in particular seems to take for granted the rule of kings.<sup>16</sup> However, the foundation of this rule is not entirely without limit or restriction. The *Aggañña Sutta* addresses the nature of the caste system (an element which is ever-present, albeit in modified form, even today in modern Indian political life), and though its origins appear to be presented as existing from time immemorial, these strata lack the socially directional nature presented in something like Plato’s comparably themed myth of the metals<sup>17</sup>. These castes are natural, but existing in one class does not have a societal or moral imperative built into it.<sup>18</sup> On the contrary, the *Aggañña Sutta* seems to

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<sup>15</sup> Walshe, Maurice. *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Digha Nikaya*. Wisdom Publications, 1995. Pg 395.

<sup>16</sup> Haynes, Jeffrey. *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Politics*. Routledge, 2009. Pg 4.

<sup>17</sup> See: Plato’s *Republic*, Book III

<sup>18</sup> Walshe, Pgs 407- 409.

anticipate a notion that would not rise to prominence in the West for millennia, a social contract.<sup>19</sup>

When reading the Buddha's prescriptive words on political life we can see a certain pragmatism. The Buddha does not hold any one political order above the other in a vacuum. Instead, political life is to be arranged in accordance to the spiritual needs of the people living within it. For the monastic community created by the Buddha, comprised of morally and spiritually upright men and women, this looks a lot like democratic rule. For the society at large, themselves not having the spiritual and philosophic benefits of enlightenment, this requires a more structured political order comprised of a spiritually upright monarch who is able to create the conditions necessary for proper action among those he rules. The politics of Buddhist thought then are pragmatic, at least insofar as the political order is as malleable as the necessities of spiritual conditions dictate in order to allow people to work towards spiritual enlightenment. There is no best regime simply, only the best regime for the circumstance.

Viewed in this light, it becomes clear that politics is at best a secondary concern to Buddhist thought. Politics is not in any way an end unto itself, but is a tool which is manipulated in any way necessary to reach the primary end of enlightenment. Politics is important to human life only insofar as it helps man towards enlightenment. If it could be eliminated entirely, all the better, as the necessities placed on man in political life are as damaging to man's condition as any other attachment. Yet the Buddha, by addressing politics, makes clear that though it is a distraction it is an inescapable distraction nonetheless.

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<sup>19</sup> Andrew Huxley, while noting the similarities in the two political notions, argues that any comparisons shouldn't seek to run too deep. He makes this argument based on the notion that Buddhist political thought at the time lacked any firm understanding of contract and contractarian obligation. Accordingly, anything more than a superficial comparison runs the risk of cultural and historical anachronism. Huxley, Andrew "The Buddha and the Social Contract." *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 24: 407-420. 1996.

Moore attempts to understand this deflationary stance towards politics as a function of what he refers to as a theory of “limited citizenship,” which he examines in light of Epicurus, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder.<sup>20</sup> In short, Moore portrays Buddhism’s politically deflationary manner as a function of divided loyalties wherein political life is placed at the bottom of a list of priorities. Accordingly, he places Buddhism’s understanding of the importance of political life among a cadre of Western thinkers who view politics as a distracting hindrance towards their own respective understandings of man’s fulfilment. Beginning from this general framework, I will expand upon Moore’s presentation of Buddhism’s deflationary understanding of politics, exploring the ways which the Buddhist understanding of enlightenment affects these concerns and contributes to Buddhism’s deflationary stance. I will contend that, beyond Moore’s presentation of limited citizenship, the deflationary understanding of politics endemic to Buddhist thought is exacerbated by the pragmatic tendencies of the greater Buddhist project and that this pragmatism has come to define contemporary Buddhist political practice.

Buddhist political theory makes clear that it is to be understood as secondary to the thought and goals of the larger Buddhist project. Accordingly, if Buddhist political life is to be reconciled within the confines of the Western political project the premises of Western political thought must be able to be made to fit, at least to a passably sufficient degree, with principles of Buddhist thought at large. While the contemporary assumption in the project of Buddhist Westernization and political globalization has been that the act of democratization serves as sufficient evidence of an overall acceptance of liberal principles in the Buddhist world, this assumption has been called into question by the Buddhist reaction in Myanmar to the perceived

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., Pg 87-111.



threat of radical Islam in the region. The reaction by the country's political system in the years since Burmese democratization has demonstrated that principles of majority rule do not by necessity bring with them a concurrent understanding of minority rights. Though Myanmar, and the vast majority of the rest of the traditionally Buddhist world, has adopted the mechanisms of the modern Western state, it is less clear that they have equally adopted the philosophical underpinnings which helped to foster its development in the West. Beginning with the foundations for the form and function of the modern Western state as laid out by Thomas Hobbes, and tracing its development through the more overtly liberal thought of John Locke, I will examine the foundations of liberal modernity and attempt to find any common ground upon which a Buddhist state in the modern era can fulfill the requirements of a state in liberal modernity while still maintaining its traditional Buddhist social functions.

When examining Hobbes's formulation of the origins of political sovereignty a particular issue presents itself. Hobbes premises his coalescence of power on a claim of human psychology— that individuals are so rightfully afraid of violent death that they will willfully transfer their power into the hands of the sovereign authority. The problem arises in regard to the Hobbesian notion of the individual and the idea of fearing death. While neither of these concepts presents much trouble within the confines of Western thought, both become problematic within the context of the Buddhist tradition. In short, the foundational Buddhist principle of *anatta* (no-self) denies the existence of any essential, personal self and the Buddhist belief in rebirth defangs the Hobbesian fear of death to the degree that it is no longer reasonable to maintain as man's prime psychological mover.

Buddhist thought presents a similar problem for Hobbes as that of Christianity. If there is a life after death, death itself might not be the great evil that Hobbes attempts to convince us it is.

Hobbes addresses this problem directly. He does so by making matters of religion themselves subject to the sovereign power of the Leviathan. Throughout the work, Hobbes slowly grows the power of his beast until it has enveloped within it even religious authority, with the sovereign being the sole arbiter on matters of faith in addition to his temporal power. The political is so exalted that its power extends to the heavens. With these powers in the hands of the sovereign, coupled with his explicit materialism and attempts throughout the work to subtly raise questions about the prospect of the soul's immortality, Hobbes raises the standing of temporal existence to the highest level. This must be the case if men are to be convinced to make the Hobbesian bargain to escape the condition of perpetual fear of death.

Buddhist political thought denies these premises of Hobbes's formation of the state in two key ways. First, the intellectual consequences of the Buddhist denial of self and belief in rebirth allow it to sidestep the problem of temporality inherent in Hobbes's formulation. Men are willing to sacrifice their power to the sovereign in Hobbes's conception because they fear death and wish to do whatever they possibly can to escape it. But death within Buddhist beliefs is not to be feared. Not only is there no proper self which is dying at all, but what the Western mind views as a looming specter is to the Buddhist merely an opportunity to further the project of enlightenment. Buddhist thought guts the psychological impetus of Hobbes's creation of the state. By removing the constraints of temporal existence, Buddhism renders the main impulse for the creation of the Hobbesian state unfounded. On Buddhist terms, Hobbes is unable to justify the condition of fear he maintains that man lives in without the benefit of the state. Second, Buddhist political thought offers no capitulation of the spiritual in favor of the political as we see in Hobbes's formulation. In reality, it is explicitly the opposite. Buddhist political theory is guided first and foremost by Buddhist religious thought. Buddhist political practice is

tied intimately with the *sangha*, or religious community, over which it governs, and where the two conflict it is the *sangha* which gives guidance and not the other way around.

Both the political theory of Thomas Hobbes and the political theory of classical Buddhism seek peace. But despite this shared end, the two are not interchangeable and in reality may be barely compatible. The political thought of modern liberalism and Buddhism also align in grounding political authority on agreement, but again the alignment is superficial. For Hobbes, the contract is made among individuals, and among individuals alone, in the hope of protecting themselves from violent death. In the Buddhist tradition, the contract (to the degree that it can even rightly be called such) is made not by individuals but between a king and those he will lead. Buddhism denies a fundamental premise of modern political thought, rooting the origins of governance in duty rather than in true consent. While both may appear as contracts, they are contracts of a fundamentally different sort. The charge of the Buddhist king is not to protect his subjects from death, but to ensure that the societal order they live in remains conducive to furthering their enlightenment. It is not a matter of creating political order for the sake of physical safety, but rather for the sake of spiritual safety. He is bound by *dhamma* (the Buddhist conception of the Truth of the Buddha's teaching, but in this function serving as the closest Buddhist equivalent to that of Western justice), but is not the creator of justice as is the case with Hobbes's sovereign. To this end, it is contrary to Buddhist principles to conceive of justice as punishment, whereas the fear of punishment by the sovereign is the foundation of its authority in Hobbes's conception. The political thought of the Buddha in this regard has much more in common with the thought of Aristotle than with that of liberalism.

Having examined the foundations of liberalism and the state in modern Western political thought and how these foundations can be reconciled with the traditional Buddhist presentation

of politics, I will look at two examples of the effects of this tension in practice. First, I will examine the treatment of the Muslim Rohingya people by the newly democratic Buddhist government of Myanmar, and second, the rise of engaged Buddhism, a modern presentation of Buddhist political practice popular among those seeking to affect positive Buddhist change within the confines of Western politics and society. While the movement of the Buddhist world towards Western-style regimes is clear, what is less clear is how deep the foundation of these changes rest. One consequence of Buddhism's fundamentally pragmatic stance towards politics is that Buddhism does not seem to require a revolution in philosophy to justify a revolution in political practice. One cannot imagine a successful American or French revolution without the philosophic upheavals with which they coincided. This has not proven to be the case with Buddhist political development. From the Buddhist perspective, changes to political structure are merely changes of circumstance rather than expressions of deep-seated philosophic revolutions. Changes in Buddhist political regimes have historically been based on much more pragmatic concerns.

The result of this view of political condition as merely circumstantial has been that Buddhist political regimes are now left in a difficult position. The Buddhist political regimes of Southeast Asia are something of a Frankenstein's monster, with the body of a Western state grafted onto the head of a Buddhist political theory. Never having undergone an explicit process of Western liberalization, and lacking the fundamental language to deal with these issues within their own tradition, modern Buddhist states modeled on Western political principles are like an alloy of two unfriendly metals. They are bonded together, but it is unclear how well the weld will hold.

From this study I conclude that, as a function of Buddhist political theory, Buddhism and the modern Western state are by and large incongruent, though there is some common ground which can be reached. It is not so much a matter of being at cross purposes as regards the ends of both modern liberalism and Buddhist thought, but a breakdown in philosophic grounding. The precepts of engaged Buddhism and Western social justice are nearly identical, but for the former to justify itself on political and social grounds in a way convincing to Western thinkers it must step outside of its own language and employ the language of the West. What Western thought understands as a function of political liberalism and fundamental human rights, Buddhist political thought can only justify internally on the grounds of Buddhist religious thought. While it frequently comes out much the same as a matter of practice, this philosophic split remains the primary problem facing Buddhist regimes as they continue the process of Westernization.

The conflict between Buddhist political thought and modern Western political thought is not simply an academic exercise. The pressures of globalization and the ease of intellectual congress made possible by modern technology have forced Buddhism into contact with Western politics, a process which shows no signs of slowing as we move into the twenty-first century. Buddhist practitioners, in both the East and West, are grappling with ways to fit together the pieces of two very different systems of beliefs. While the issues inherent in attempts of this sort are well-known and documented as it regards society or culture, far less attention is given to issues of politics and political theory. There is seemingly an unstated assumption, particularly on the part of those in the West, that since we have seen the workings and effectiveness of the Western state demonstrated at home, its value must be obvious to all and its principles self-evident. If this were truly the case, transitioning Buddhist countries into a Western style of political life should be as easy as writing a republican constitution and holding elections. The

transition of Buddhism into Western political culture shows that this is not true. Political regimes must be founded on a political theory.

Through the lenses of the crisis in Myanmar and the Engaged Buddhism movement it becomes clear that the transition of Buddhist political life into the realm of Western politics should not be expected to be a seamless shift. The politics of Western liberalism and the architecture of the Western state rest their intellectual foundations on the complementary notions of individual rights and the primacy of political life. The intellectual claims of sovereignty underlying the Western conception of the modern state expand the boundaries of politics into quarters which are foreign to the historical conceptions of politics in traditionally Buddhist states. The modern Western state demands supremacy and sovereignty within the confines of its boundaries. From its origins in the political theory of Hobbes, modern Western politics understands itself as both necessary and primary. The claims of Buddhist political thought challenge this supremacy, and in doing so create a fundamental tension within the project of Buddhist political Westernization.

While there is undoubtedly a distinct gulf between the presentation of political life given by Buddhist thought and that given by the modern Western political thought, the final goal of this dissertation is to present an understanding of the ways that Buddhism's deflationary understanding of politics can speak to the issues inherent in the Western political tradition. In particular, I will examine the possibility that Buddhism's deflationary stance towards politics can help to address the Western problem of destructive ideological politics, such as those seen in the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century. A primary problem facing Western society at the start of the twenty-first century is how maintain a political life which remains vibrant while simultaneously managing to avoid the resurrection of the destructive ideological systems of the

last century. These ideologically-led totalitarian regimes represent the philosophic culmination of the Western obsession with the political. They are embodiments of an apparent flaw in Western political thought, originating in antiquity and intensified in modernity, which intrinsically ties together political life and the fulfillment of man's highest ends. Western thought takes as a premise the idea that man cannot reach his highest end in the absence of a political condition. Politics is always understood as either natural or a necessary consequence which follows from man's nature. In either case, politics in Western thought is inescapable and ever-present. The effects of this understanding found their highest expressions in the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, which premised themselves on the utopian understanding that politics is capable of transcending the merely human and is sufficient, in and of itself, to bringing about worldly perfection.

The reorientation away from the primacy of politics offered by Buddhist political thought represents a meaningful critique and a useful tool to attack the roots of this problem of destructive ideological systems. Buddhism suggests a possible alternative understanding to the political tradition of the West by offering a political thought which understands politics as merely one tool among many for the quest to achieve man's highest ends. Further, Buddhism understands politics as a tool that can and must be disregarded as soon as it has outlived its usefulness rather than as a necessity required to achieve man's fullest expression. By taking seriously the Buddhist notion of politics as secondary and instrumental rather than as primary and necessary, we find a possible inoculation against the dangers of ideology which is not able to be concocted from within the context of Western political thought alone. Because Buddhist political thought and Western political thought diverge from the instance of first principles, the

vantage offered by Buddhist political thought allows for an avenue into philosophic considerations which have as of yet remained mostly untrodden by Western thought.

### **The Structure of this Dissertation**

Part I of this dissertation seeks to compare the underlying political thought of the Buddhist political tradition and the political tradition of Western modernity. In Chapter One, I will consider the political texts of the Buddhist Pāli Canon, focusing on their presentation of the proper action of political rulers and the role of wisdom in political life. In Chapters Two, Three, and Four, I will examine the foundations of liberalism and the modern Western state. I will do so primarily using the proto-liberal presentation of politics and the state in Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*, and its subsequent development in the writing of John Locke. I will focus on the ideas of human nature, the individual, and political wisdom, juxtaposing these Western conceptions with the Buddhist presentations of the same.

Part II of this dissertation seeks to view these principles as we find them in modern political practice. I will explore the practical effects of these varying foundations as the political orders of the Buddhist world attempt to move into the sphere of Western political life. Using the lenses of the humanitarian crisis in Myanmar in Chapter Five and the Western-based movement of politically active socially-engaged Buddhism in Chapter Six, I will assess the possibility of a practical intermingling of Western liberal values and traditional Buddhist understandings of politics. In Chapter Seven, I will conclude by discussing the ways which the Buddhist presentation of politics can help address the deficiencies of the Western political project, particularly the problem of ideology.



**PART I: THE FOUNDATIONS OF POLITICAL LIFE**

## **CHAPTER ONE: BUDDHIST POLITICAL THOUGHT**

To speak about Buddhist political thought is to a degree to fail to take Buddhism on its own terms. While there is undoubtedly a political theory which can be wrangled from the writings of the Buddha, it is decidedly secondary, both in presentation and in substance. The Buddhist project at its core is not one of external transformation, but of internal transformation. Insofar as Buddhist political theory exists it cannot be meaningfully separated from the larger Buddhist soteriological project of enlightenment. Where we see political action in the writings of the Buddha, it always takes place both in the context of and in the service of the greater goal of enlightenment.

The defining characteristic of Buddhist political thought is that it understands itself as decidedly secondary and by and large unimportant. Unlike Western thought, wherein politics has since the age of the Greeks been viewed as primary and fundamental, Buddhist thought understands politics to be a mere tool in the larger Buddhist project. This devaluation of political life is made clear not only in how politics is addressed in Buddhist thought, but in how it is not. Though the Pāli Canon, which is held to be the direct teachings of the Buddha, comprises fifty-seven volumes, a mere fifty or so pages of this substantively addresses politics in any meaningful way. Further, where politics is addressed it is made clear that it can only be understood within the context of the Buddhist program of enlightenment.

### **What is Buddhism?**

Before entering into a discussion about the Buddha's presentation of politics some attention must first be paid to the general Buddhist project. At its core Buddhism is meant to serve as means to promote human enlightenment. In the case of Buddhism, enlightenment is understood as the ability to cease suffering. This cessation is undergone not by trying to

eliminate the individual and specific things that cause suffering, but by reorienting our understanding to realize that suffering is not truly caused by those things at all but by our own wants, desires, and cravings. The basics of the Buddha's teachings are able to be quite succinctly summarized, distilled into a compact package referred to as The Four Noble Truths, given by the Buddha in his first sermon after reaching enlightenment. The first Truth maintains that suffering (*dukkha*) exists, that its presence defines the nature of existence, and that the elements themselves which cause suffering are ever-present. The second Truth presents the Buddhist understanding of the cause of suffering. The root of suffering lies not outside of man but in his own internal desires. Men crave things, be they material goods, physical pleasures, or even an escape from death. However, these desires can never actually be sated. The fulfillment of one desire simply leads to the creations of a new desire, and the pleasure we feel from the satisfaction of a craving is only ever temporary. Pleasure exists but it is fleeting, and upon its exit we are left more hollow than before its arrival. The third Truth maintains that with us now understanding the causes of suffering we are able to end the suffering itself by removing its causes. The fourth Truth, referred to as the Eightfold Path, offers the prescriptive means through which we can accomplish this goal. It proposes a set of guidelines of action which are as follows: Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Concentration and Right Mindfulness.<sup>1</sup> At its core, Buddhism is this simply defined. It is likely because of these simple rules and their implicit rejection of theism that Nietzsche referred to Buddhism as the only positivistic religion in history, understanding its

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<sup>1</sup> The Eightfold Path contains a series of prescriptive conditions for proper living which are meant to guide the practitioner towards enlightenment. It should be noted however, that while prescriptive, the Eightfold Path is not a series of rules. Instead, they are more like parameters meant to keep one on the path towards enlightenment, as with bumpers in a bowling alley. There is a wide breadth of action which can take place within these parameters, and none of these actions are considered inherently more fruitful towards attaining enlightenment than the others. In this regard, Buddhism maintains a basic structure but still allows for the radically individualistic practices of certain sects.

rationale as grounded not on mere assertions and claims but from rationally justifiable observations.<sup>2</sup>

Yet even this presentation of Buddhism as a religion needs to be addressed. Though Buddhism is most frequently understood as a religion from the view of the West, the reality is much more nuanced. The application of the term “religion” to Buddhism speaks more about a lack of appropriate Western language to describe Buddhist practice than it does Buddhism’s understanding of itself. While it is typically spoken of in the West in terms of religion, this is a problematic and reductionist understanding. It is, however, equally untenable to view Buddhism solely as a philosophy. Some, like Walter Kaufmann, go so far as to refer to Buddhism as explicitly “antiphilosophical.”<sup>3</sup> Buddhism, by the nature of its truth claims, goals, and approaches, seems to exist in a brackish middle between the two. At the very least it can be comfortably maintained that Buddhism is non-theistic. While many traditions hold practices of veneration for the Buddha, including statuary and temples, no sect maintains his divinity. Buddhism appears to maintain its standing as a religion only to the degree to which one seeks to maintain the Western paradigm of religion as that which gives guidance to human action and meaning to life. Buddhism clearly fills these roles. But the guidance it gives is distinct from any Western religion. Even the words and practices of the Buddha himself are expressly presented as up for examination, and there is no understanding that what helps one person reach enlightenment (even the practices of the Buddha himself) will be effective for another. There are basic parameters which must be accepted (in particular the Four Noble Truths) but even these are better understood as principles rather than rules. There is no such thing as “best practices”. While some things may tend to work better for most than others, it is about the goal of enlightenment

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<sup>2</sup> Kaufmann, Walter. *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*. Princeton University Press, 1990. Pg 262.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

rather than the route taken to get there. This notion is evidenced clearly in the Zen tradition. A practice very familiar in the West is that of meditative gardens of rock and sand. The raking of the sand in these gardens is considered a form of meditation equally conducive in the practice of reaching enlightenment as any of the more traditional meditative practices.<sup>4</sup> A similar example is found in the Zen understanding that enlightenment can be achieved through seemingly benign and mundane everyday practices such as sweeping.<sup>5</sup>

To understand Buddhism strictly as a religion is reductive, though only the most uncharitable would maintain that Buddhism doesn't serve the religious functions of providing an ethics, a direction for existential purpose, and even a basic soteriology. An understanding of Buddhism as philosophy is clearer yet still ambiguous. To begin, similar to philosophy but contrary to traditional understandings of religion, Buddhism does not rest on a faith claim. Adherence to Buddhist practice does not require the acceptance of a doctrine bolstered by claims of authority. Instead, Buddhism explicitly calls for the testing of its claims against reason and nature. As Mark Sederits describes the situation,

As we would expect from any religion, Buddhist teachings include some claims that run contrary to common sense. But Buddhists are not expected to accept these claims just because the Buddha taught them. Instead, they are expected to examine the arguments that support these claims, and determine for themselves if the arguments really make it likely that these claims are true.<sup>6</sup>

Huston Smith and Philip Novak go so far to claim that Buddhism is inherently empirical and scientific in its practice, basing its doctrines not on claims of faith but on a pragmatic notion of

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<sup>4</sup> Watts, Alan. *The Way of Zen*. Vintage, 1989. Pgs 194-195.

<sup>5</sup> Suzuki, Daisetz. *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D.T. Suzuki*. Ed. William Barrett. Doubleday, 1996. Pg 113.

<sup>6</sup> Sederits, Mark. *Buddhism as Philosophy: An Introduction*. Ashgate, 2007. Pg 7.

cause and effect.<sup>7</sup> At its core then, Buddhism is an inherently philosophic practice. Claims are given and claims are tested, both towards the goal of better understanding the nature of reality.

The primary difference between Buddhism and Western philosophy and religion isn't found in their respective understandings of the relationship between faith and reason, but instead in Buddhism's understanding of precisely what reason itself entails. Whereas Western philosophy understands reason as the tool through which we can come to grasp (or at least make the attempt to grasp) the ultimate nature of reality through the philosophic act, Buddhism harnesses reason only as a tool to ultimately transcend itself. Reasoning and a striving towards the nature of reality (in the case of Buddhism, finding enlightenment) is valued, but reason itself can only take one so far. In reality, as valuable a tool as reason is, once its purpose has been served it becomes an insurmountable impediment to the culmination of the act of enlightenment. Whereas Greek philosophy, and Western thought generally, makes a distinction between the physical and the intellectual, Buddhism blurs this distinction. Erotic passion of the body and erotic passion of the mind are indistinguishable as it regards the shedding of want in the quest for enlightenment.<sup>8</sup> Thirst of the body represents desire which retards the progress of enlightenment. Thirst of the mind is no different. The Greeks posited philosophy as the highest way of life and the resulting enlightenment found in the philosophic act as the highest good. Buddhism requires that one be philosophic, but not a true philosopher.<sup>9</sup> Reason is like a warm coat, completely necessary to get one through the cold winter but smothering and causing

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<sup>7</sup> Smith, Huston, and Philip Novak. *Buddhism*. HarperCollins, 2005. Pg 29.

<sup>8</sup> Droit, Roger-Pol. *The Cult of Nothingness: The Philosophers and the Buddha*. Trans. David Streight and Pamela Vohnson. University of North Carolina, 2003. Pgs 2-3.

<sup>9</sup> Douglass Smith and Justin Whitaker draw attention to an interesting convention within Buddhist thought of presenting the Buddha with the imagery of a physician, removing the "poisoned arrow of ignorance" from man's existence. One cannot help but draw comparisons to Socrates' discussion of physicians throughout *The Republic*. Smith, Douglass, and Justin Whitaker. "Reading the Buddha as a Philosopher." *Philosophy East and West* 66:515-538.

exhaustion in the warmth of summer. Reason is required, but only until it is not. An inability to abandon it once its purpose has been served is no different for the Buddhist than the inability to abstain from any other worldly desire. Reason is not special for the Buddhist the way it is for the Greeks.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, as philosophic as it may be, Buddhism cannot rightly be understood simply as a philosophy in the traditional sense of the term. Yet nor can it simply be understood as a religion. It serves many of the functions of a religion, but it plants its foundations in the observable rather than faith. Conversely, it takes on the rational demeanor of philosophy, but only to a point, beyond which it completely abandons it. As it regards the question of its standing as either a religion or a philosophy, Buddhism is fully neither, but nearly both.

Through the acknowledgement of the Four Noble Truths and the use of the Eightfold Path, Buddhism holds that man is able to escape the ceaseless cycle of suffering (*samsāra*), both at the temporal and spiritual level. The former is understood as the escape from material desires and cravings. The second, however, goes beyond the temporal and claims that through the enlightenment gained in Buddhist practice man is able to transcend materiality and temporality completely and escape the eternal cycle of birth, death and rebirth, attaining a condition beyond craving and suffering (*nibbana*)<sup>11</sup>. This is the Buddhist path to enlightenment- a series of truth

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<sup>10</sup> This is evidenced most clearly in the Zen tradition, particularly in the practice of Koan poetry. These exercises are meant show the ultimate inanity of reason, typically presented as a brief question and answer exchange between a student and an enlightened teacher.

There are a number of examples of Koan which have gained popularity in the West, such as the question of “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” or the exhortation that “If you meet that Buddha, kill the Buddha.” However, most Koan are more arcane or cryptic in their lessons, for example— “A monk asked Master Haryo, ‘What is the way?’ Haryo said, ‘An open-eyed man falling into the well.’”

<sup>11</sup> This concept is better known in the West by its Sanskrit cognate *nirvana*. This is equally true for the Pāli *dhmma* (Sanskrit: *dharma*) and *kamma* (Sanskrit: *karma*). Batchelor (2010) compares the relationship of Pāli to Sanskrit to that of Italian to Latin. Walshe (1995) claims that the languages are so similar that it is possible to convert whole passages simply by means of mechanical transposition. Conceptually, the terms retain the same meaning regardless of dialect. In order to maintain consistency with the Pāli texts, I will use Pāli terms throughout, except in instances when direct quotation favors the Sanskrit.

claims, premised on the pragmatic notion that if we accept the problem of suffering and rightfully understand its causes then we are then able to eliminate its effects. Buddhism seeks to end worldly, temporal problems not through changing the world but through reorienting our own understanding so as to render the problem moot. This understanding, prioritizing the reorientation of our own being as a means to correct our issues rather than attempting to shape the world to fit our needs, I will argue is a key element to understanding Buddhist political philosophy.

### **Buddhist Political Thought and the Pāli Canon**

In seeking to explore the origins and foundations of Buddhist political thought, one must begin at the beginning. In the case of Buddhism, this means examining the Pāli Canon. The Pāli Canon is the most ancient collection of Buddhist thought, originated in an oral tradition before finally being codified several hundred years after the death of the Buddha. Though there is debate among scholars on the matter, the Pāli Canon is historically believed to contain, to the greatest degree available, the actual teachings of the Buddha himself. For their part, all major Buddhist traditions maintain the authenticity of the Pāli writings as originating from the direct teachings of the Buddha, mirroring his beliefs in substance even if the texts themselves did not originate until much later.

The value of focusing on the Pāli Canon is two-fold. First, while the Pāli texts have been influential to every sect of the Buddhist tradition, they themselves are not properly products of any particular tradition. Accordingly, in being both among the most ancient texts of the Buddhist tradition and by way of being held forth as containing the authentic teachings of the Buddha himself, the texts of the Pāli Canon are the most pure and unadulterated writings of the Buddhist



tradition<sup>12</sup>. Second, and closely related, though the traditions and sects of Buddhism are many, all equally share in the teachings of the Pāli Canon. Of the three main branches of Buddhism, both Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhism hold the Pāli Canon to be the authentic teachings of the Buddha himself. Theravāda Buddhism, the eldest of the three branches, holds the Pāli Canon as its primary scripture. Accordingly, by using the teachings of the Pāli Canon we are able to make observations that are valid across the board regardless of sectarian differences.<sup>13</sup> Though each sect may have further beliefs that modify the teachings of the Pāli Canon, each holds the lessons of the Pāli Canon in esteem.

### **The Political Texts of the Pāli Canon**

As a matter of politics, Buddhism finds itself in an odd and counterintuitive position, one which has led over the course of Buddhist political experience to a number of conflicting outcomes and actions. The contradictions baked into Buddhist political thought lie in the fact that though Buddhist thought and practice calls for a rejection of worldly things (and thus necessarily of political life as well), it also came into being, at least secondarily, as a response to the rigid caste system of India during Buddhism's founding.<sup>14</sup> Siddhartha Gautama, who would come to assume the title of *Buddha*, or Enlightened One, was himself the son of a political leader.<sup>15</sup> In particular, the founding act of Buddhism was Siddhartha's explicit rejection of his

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<sup>12</sup> Though this is not to maintain that the texts of the Pāli Canon are without issue. As Stephen Batchelor (2010) notes, Pāli is a dialect which survived as an oral tradition but lacks a proper formal script. Accordingly, all written versions of the Pāli Canon are taken down in the script of those recording them. The issues as it regards maintaining the purity of the teachings are obvious here. A practical example of this issue can be seen in the *Agamas*, a Chinese version of the Pāli Canon. The *Agamas* was itself based off of a now lost Sanskrit version of the Pāli Canon. Most interestingly, the *Agamas* mirrors the other extant versions of the Pāli Canon in both substance and arrangement, yet exhibits subtle differences in wording. This is likely evidence of generation loss as the text crosses from tradition to tradition and language to language.

<sup>13</sup> Moore, Matthew. *Buddhism and Political Theory*. Oxford, 2016. Pg 15.

<sup>14</sup> Jayasuriya, Laksiri. "Buddhism, Politics, and Statecraft." *International Journal of Buddhist Thought and Culture* 11: 41-74. 2008. Pg 47.

<sup>15</sup> Though most casual narratives of the life of the Buddha refer to him as the son of a king, this was not the case. In reality the Buddha's father was an elected clan chief rather than a monarch. This confusion may have initially arisen

privileged, political standing in order to pursue enlightenment. While politics is only tangential to broader Buddhist thought, its founding was an inherently political act. Buddhism henceforth was, and continues to be, forced to balance a fine line between rejecting political life while simultaneously living in a political world. Matthew Moore describes this position as one which views political life as necessary but decidedly unimportant.<sup>16</sup> It is ultimately a problem of theory versus praxis. Buddhism calls for its practitioners to lead an existence focused to a large degree on *rejecting* existence. In the political sphere, this means that Buddhists must somehow act politically while also rejecting the trappings of political life.

To someone reared in Western thought, this contradiction seems unworkable. Western philosophy since the Greeks has placed a premium and arguably even a primacy on politics and the political life. The entire Western perspective is oriented through a political lens. But what the Western mind views as an intractable contradiction which must be reckoned with in order to logically reconcile a true politics, the Buddhist views as an issue that needn't really be dealt with beyond any practical concerns. Generally speaking, Buddhist political thought views itself as unimportant. The death of Socrates forced the Western tradition to believe that philosophy itself must be preceded and protected by a robust political philosophy. Buddhism, having not faced a comparable political trauma at its founding, is content to leave politics on the backburner, only addressing it whenever directly necessary, and even then only sparingly.

This understanding is reflected in the texts of the Buddhist tradition. Matthew Moore, a scholar at the forefront of Buddhist comparative political thought, finds only five texts in the entirety of the ancient Buddhist Pāli Canon which offer substantive guidance to an understanding

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due to his title of *raja*, a term which contemporarily carries connotations of kingship but which has a more nuanced meaning in its ancient usage.

<sup>16</sup> Moore (2016), Pg 9.

of Buddhist political thought.<sup>17</sup> This figure is all the more impressive given that some editions of the complete Pāli Canon reach fifty-five hundred pages, while these texts with contain political thought number around only fifty or so pages. These few texts comprise the totality of the known political thought of the Buddha himself. As Moore describes the situation, “there are many, many passages in the Pāli Canon that mention kings, but only a handful that appear to give advice about how kings should behave.”<sup>18</sup> Within the Pāli Canon, there are four main texts relevant to an analysis of Buddhist political theory. These are the *Aggañña Sutta*, *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta*, the *Mahāsudassana Sutta*, and the *Mahāparinibbāṇa Sutta*. Additionally, there is some political thought to be found in some various sections of the *Jataka Tales*.

These texts, though lacking the robustness of much Western political theory, nonetheless give some guidance to proper political action from the Buddhist perspective. Though their premises are foreign, the texts present a picture of political life that is not wholly dissimilar from that of Western political thought. The basic political theory of the texts, shown primarily in the *Aggañña Sutta* and the *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta*, indicates a preference towards the rule of kings, who are meant to serve as moral exemplars and use their power as a means to further Buddhist moral development. The *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta* gestures that this form of rule is the natural condition for mankind. But despite their moral standing, the political legitimacy of these Buddhist kings is not simply assumed. The *Aggañña Sutta* views the issue of political foundations in light of the nature of the caste system (a dominant political force in the Buddha’s political epoch). Though these social hierarchies are presented as being ancient in origin, the text denies their standing as socially imperative and morally meaningful, indicating that these divisions themselves are not restrictive of man’s nature. These castes are natural, but birth into

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., Pgs 17-23.

<sup>18</sup> Moore, Matthew. “Political Theory in Canonical Buddhism.” *Philosophy East and West* 65: 36-64. 2015. Pg 37.

one class is not a permanent sentence nor an indication of underlying moral standing. The political picture given by the *Aggañña Sutta* instead views society and political life as a function of choice and action, and in doing so anticipates something like the Western understanding of political life as founded on agreement and contract.

### *The Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta*

The *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta* deals with the subject of the *cakkavatti* or “wheel-turning monarch,” a designation which comes to define a great deal of Buddhist political thought. The title refers to a leader who “forwards the wheel of *dhamma*” or rules in line with Buddhist principles. This symbology of wheel-turning is littered throughout Buddhist practice.<sup>19</sup> More particularly, the *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta* describes a situation where a monarch fails to live up to the standards *dhamma* imposes, the guidelines for which are outlined in the *Mahāsudassana Sutta*. Here it is made clear that *cakkavatti* is not merely a title bestowed by lineage or force, but through moral standing. The morality of the king in line with *dhamma* is a prerequisite for his rule, and then his legitimacy is maintained through ruling in *dhamma* and leading his people to do the same.

The *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta* opens with Dalhanemi, a wheel-turning monarch nearing the end of his life. Having come to this realization Dalhanemi chooses to relinquish his rule and end his days seeking spiritual wisdom as an ascetic, an action which is found elsewhere in the Pāli Canon and is mirrored throughout Buddhist history. Following his abdication it is noted that his “wheel treasure” has also disappeared. This wheel treasure is a visual representation, somehow magical yet made manifest in the real-world, of the monarch’s upright moral standing and thus also of the legitimacy of his rule. Dalhaenmi’s successor consults with the royal sage,

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<sup>19</sup> Levenson, Claude B. and Laziz Hamani. *Symbols of Tibetan Buddhism*. Barnes & Noble, 2003.

who makes clear to him that the wheel treasure is not simply bestowed onto a ruler but is earned through upright moral action in line with *dhamma*. These actions include honoring and revering the *dhamma*, bringing a cessation to crime, and granting protection and aid to those of his land, including beasts and birds. Importantly, the *cakkavatti* is also given the following advice,

And whatever ascetics and Brahmins<sup>20</sup> in your kingdom have renounced the life of sensual infatuation and are devoted to forbearance and gentleness...from time to time you should go and consult them as to what is wholesome and what is unwholesome, what is blameworthy and what is blameless, and what action will in the long run lead to harm and sorrow, and what to welfare and happiness. Having listened to them, you should avoid evil and do what is good. That, my son, is the duty of an Ariyan wheel-turning monarch.<sup>21</sup>

We see here the origins of the political ties between Buddhist rulers and the *sangha*<sup>22</sup>, a relationship which defines much of Buddhist political thought and practice.

The issues in the *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta* arise upon the reign of the eighth monarch of the tale. This king, upon hearing of the disappearance of the wheel treasure is saddened and upset, but unlike his predecessors does not go to consult the royal sage to learn of his moral duties. Instead, this king “ruled the people according to his own ideas, and, being so ruled, the

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<sup>20</sup> Within the hierarchical caste system of the Buddha’s India, the Brahmin were priests (and in this capacity also scholars and educators) and composed the highest societal caste. They were followed in stature by the Kshatriya, who were composed of warriors and administrative officials, and then by the agricultural and mercantile Vaishya. The lowest caste, the Shudra, were primarily laborers. The origins and bases of these divisions were many, but were mostly centered on the issues of *varna* (roughly equivalent to racism/colorism) and *jati* (related to one’s standing of birth) While these distinctions were considered very meaningful by society at large, a great part of the Buddha’s early political/social project was working to undermine this hierarchy. The Buddha spoke out against the traditional caste system a number of times throughout the Pāli texts, notably stating in the *Vasala Sutta* that ““Not by birth is one an outcast; not by birth is one a brahman. By deed one becomes an outcast, by deed one becomes a brahman.” (Thera, Piyadasi. *The Book of Protection*. Buddhist Publication Society, 1999.) By relating social standing to action rather than arbitrary characteristics of birth, the Buddha introduces *kamma* (Sanskrit: *karma*), or the notion of reciprocal action, as a political principle.

<sup>21</sup> Walshe, Pg 397.

<sup>22</sup> In its traditional usage, the *sangha* refers to the formal monastic community of Buddhist practitioners. In most contemporary usage, as developed through the Mahāyāna tradition of practice, the *sangha* has come to refer to the collective body of all Buddhist practitioners, lay or otherwise, in a given region. The importance of the *sangha*, and the political effects of this broadened definition, will be examine in Chapters Five and Six.

people did not prosper so well as they had done under the previous kings who had performed the duties of a wheel-turning monarch.”<sup>23</sup> Seeing this, the king relents and consults the sages and minister to learn of his duties, yet even then only chooses to embrace some of their advice, establishing physical protection for those under his rule but failing to provide for those in need. As a consequence of the king’s actions we are told that poverty becomes rife in his kingdom. The unaddressed poverty leads to crime, which leads to greed. The text thus makes clear that merely consulting the spiritual community is not sufficient for proper rule. The consultation must be done in good faith and be followed by meaningful action.

This begins a chain of cycling strife. Because people are poor and starving, theft becomes rampant.<sup>24</sup> As a result, it becomes necessary for the king to introduce violent punishment, even rising to level of capital punishment. This introduction of violence spirals, halving the life-span of those in the kingdom from eighty-thousand years to forty-thousand. Next is introduced lying, halving the life-span again. This process continues with the introduction of sexual misconduct, false opinion, and the lack of respect for tradition, among other societal ills, until the life-span has decreased to only ten years.

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<sup>23</sup> Walshe, Pg 399.

<sup>24</sup> The importance of economics to social stability (and thus ultimately to moral stability) is found elsewhere in the Pāli texts as well. In the *Kūṭadanta Sutta*, a story is relayed by the Buddha of a prosperous king who is considering an offering of sacrifice as a means to maintain his good fortune. He is eventually dissuaded of this by a chaplain, who instead directs the king to use the wealth that would be tied up into a sacrifice to instead institute a very rudimentary form of social welfare that will work to maintain the king’s glory in a practical way. Wages are raised to those in his employ. Money for investment is made available to merchants, and subsidies are given to farmers. With these investments made in lieu of a sacrifice, the king finds not only a greater stability in his regime but an improvement of condition for all within. Both here and in the *Cakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta* the logic seems to be clear— without a basic condition of stability society will suffer, and without a general condition of stability in society one is not able to adequately undertake the project of enlightenment. Whether this is a specifically political goal or not is debatable. While it certainly is not a blueprint for a modern welfare state, it does place a baseline requirement which must be met. The claim that this general condition of stability must be *created* by government seems far less certain, though a burden is placed on the regime to at least maintain it to a baseline threshold if that government wishes to both maintain its own legitimacy and contribute to the project of enlightenment. Walshe, Pgs 133-141.

The *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta* now describes man living in a condition which could rightfully be described as solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. Yet where Hobbes finds a social contract, the *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta* simply describes a slow realization taking place among “some beings” that their condition is a result of their own action. They begin by abstaining from violence, and see a doubling in both life-span and beauty. This process is repeated until man arrives back at the life and condition of his eighty-thousand year living former selves. Here the text relays that there will “arise” a new wheeling-turning monarch who will live and teach in accordance with the *dhamma*. While this parallels this rise of the monarch found later in the *Aggañña Sutta*, it is notable here that there is no call from the people to discover or appointment the *cakkavatti* in the *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta*. Instead his rise seems to be as much a function of prophecy as choice by the people. His necessity is clear, though his provenance is not.

### *The Aggañña Sutta*

The *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta* is immediately followed in the Pāli Canon by another overtly political text, the *Aggañña Sutta*. The *Aggañña Sutta* presents itself primarily as a commentary on the caste system and the social order. It is asserted very early on in the text that while these caste divisions may have some social value, they are lacking a strong moral component. Both “dark and bright” qualities are “scattered indiscriminately among the four castes.”<sup>25</sup> Given the historical context of the Buddha, this claim is in and of itself political, representing a critique and ultimate rejection of the pre-existing social structure. The *Aggañña Sutta* makes clear that virtue is not a function of social standing or rank but is instead found “by

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<sup>25</sup> Walshe, Pg 408.

virtue of Dhamma.”<sup>26</sup> This evocation of *dhamma* sets the tone for the greater political understanding present in the Pāli Canon. Within Buddhist thought, *dhamma* is both a fundamental concept yet one that has a slippery and multi-pronged definition. Within a political context, *dhamma* is likely the closest equivalent Buddhist concept to that of Western justice.<sup>27</sup> But that greatly undersells its larger role in Buddhist thought. Depending on its context, *dhamma* also refers to the revelations of the teachings of the Buddha himself, or more broadly to the idea of the truth that underlies the nature of existence.<sup>28</sup> As the *Aggañña Sutta* (and all of the political texts of the Pāli Canon) make clear, *dhamma* and right political rule are inherently intertwined.

The narrative of the *Aggañña Sutta* revolves around something like a creation myth, though it is more properly a tale of cyclical rebirth than of creation *ex nihilo*. We are told that “sooner or later, after a very long period of time, this world contracts,” and later that it begins to expand again.<sup>29</sup> This sets in motion the development of a decaying existence which is riddled with craving, theft, and immorality. The narrative begins by describing what appears to be meant to be understood as an idyllic condition of existence without proper form. The text describes this existence as “just one mass of water, and all was darkness...night and day were not distinguished, nor months and fortnights...and no male and female, beings being reckoned just as beings.”<sup>30</sup> This existence is pre-political, pre-societal, and perhaps even pre-individual. But it does not remain that way for long. Soon a being tastes the “savory earth” that surrounds

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Important to note in a political context- in these instances where *dhamma* refers to law and justice, while *dhamma* is the universal law which underpins the moral order of the universe it is neither caused by nor under the control of any supreme power. Its existence is natural, leading to Damien Keown allowing that it may also be translated as “natural law.” Keown, Damien. *Buddhism*. Sterling, 2009. Pgs 147-148.

<sup>28</sup> Kirimura, Yasuji. *Fundamentals of Buddhism*. Nichiren Shoshu International Center, 1984. Pg 26.

<sup>29</sup> Walshe, Pg 409.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., Pg 410.



them, beginning the origin of craving in man. As the narrative continues man's cravings lead him to sample more and more of the world around him, leading only to new and ever-increasing cravings. With each rise of want, humanity suffers an accordant devolution, their bodies coarsening and becoming increasingly distant from the condition perfect nothingness.

The outcome of this coarsening, both of body and of society, is the necessity of the introduction of political life. Man is now capable of being ugly, greedy, and immoral. The need for food has led man to the cultivation of rice, with each man benefitting from his labor within the confines of own private boundaries. Here with the introduction of property comes the introduction of theft and more importantly the introduction of violence. Reflecting upon the rise of evil within their world, the beings are brought to the following solution, "Suppose we were to appoint a certain being who would show anger when anger was due, censure those who deserved it, and banish those who deserved banishment! And in return, we would grant him a share of rice."<sup>31</sup> This leader is dubbed *Maha-Sammata*, which according to the text means "The People's Choice." The criteria for their decision lists seeking the most handsome, best-looking, most pleasant and most capable among them. With the exception of most capable, these criteria seem odd, if not a bit superficial. However, given the description earlier in the text of the introduction of beauty and ugliness as a function of the rise of greed, this would seem to imply a connection between positive physical appearance and moral purity.

The presentation of the origins of political life found in *Aggañña Sutta* are interesting for a few reasons. What is most striking to the student of Western political thought are the ways in which the beginnings of political life presented in the *Aggañña Sutta* mirror that of modern social contract thinkers, and primarily Thomas Hobbes. For both Hobbes and the *Aggañña*

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., Pg 413.

*Sutta*, the authority of political power is premised on the fact that we are trying to escape a condition of violence. In both cases, the pre-political condition has become so untenable that the only viable means of escape is through the process of legitimizing and concentrating the justice of violence into the hands of the state.

More interestingly, given the span it would take until the idea would meaningfully arise again, the *Aggañña Sutta*'s presentation of the people coming together not only to select who will rule but to first decide that this rule is necessary in the first place closely mirrors Hobbes's presentation of the social contract. This idea has already received a fair amount of attention. Andrew Huxley<sup>32</sup> and Steven Collins<sup>33</sup> engage in a debate on the validity of attempting to read the ancient Pāli text of the *Aggañña Sutta* in light of Western conceptions of the social contract. Huxley, critical of the reading of the *Aggañña Sutta* as promoting an understanding of the social contract premises his argument on the notion that even speaking of the idea of contracts (and particularly as understood within the confines of the Western legal tradition) runs the risk of social and historical anachronism. According to Huxley, the idea of a contractarian arrangement exerting coercive power over two voluntary parties is a notion that was wholly foreign to the time and place of the Buddha in early India. He argues instead that we are more correct in reading this section of the *Aggañña Sutta* as a call to those who are being governed to accept the inherent authority of those who rule them. In other words, the *Aggañña Sutta* lays the framework for the legitimacy of political life and political power broadly. Collins, while granting Huxley's point on the issues inherent in treating the teachings of the *Aggañña Sutta* strictly as a matter of Western-style social contract thinking, nonetheless maintains that there is more to the *Aggañña*

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<sup>32</sup> Huxley, Andrew "The Buddha and the Social Contract." *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 24: 407-420. 1996.

<sup>33</sup> Collins, Steven. "The Lion's Roar on the Wheel-Turning King: A Response to Andrew Huxley's 'The Buddha and the Social Contract.'" *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 24: 421-446. 1996.

*Sutta* than a simple acknowledgement of the existence of political life. Beyond its value as a clear critique of the standing social order and a statement of fundamental equality, Collins argues that the *Aggañña Sutta* presents us with a standard by which to judge the rule of kings. It should be noted, however, that the *Aggañña Sutta* does not offer any theory of the justifiability of rebellion, even when compared to the weak model of the same offered by Hobbes.<sup>34</sup>

While the structure and purpose of the *Aggañña Sutta* and the *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta* are similar, they seem to point to differing conclusions. In the *Aggañña Sutta*, kings base their rule on the acceptance of the people, whereas the *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta* rests the authority of kings on their moral fortitude. Balkrishna Gokhale, a leading scholar on early Buddhism, seeks to place this differentiation outside of the bounds of political theory. Instead he argues that this difference represents an intentional attempt by the Buddha (or perhaps by those who later codified the texts) to raise the political standing of the *sangha*.<sup>35</sup> Matthew Moore attempts, however, to minimize the importance of the difference between the texts. According to his reading, the two representations of political life are different because they represent different periods of political development. The *Aggañña Sutta* is a story of origins and the initial founding of political life, whereas the *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta* presents a period of perfection wherein political life has already been established.<sup>36</sup>

In a number of ways, the political texts of the Pāli Canon parallel the presentation of politics found in Thomas Hobbes. The *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta* presents the origins of political life (albeit quite a ways removed) as found in the necessity to remove man from a base

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<sup>34</sup> Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan: With Selected Variants from the Latin Edition of 1668*. Hackett Publishing, 1994. Chapter XVIII.

<sup>35</sup> Gokhale, Balkrishna Govind. "The Early Buddhist View of the State." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 89: 731-738. 1969.

<sup>36</sup> Moore (2016), Pg 25.

and brutal condition. The *Aggañña Sutta* presents the formation of political life as arising from the choice of the people. Yet both gesture in the direction of ancient Western political thought more than Hobbes in maintaining that politics is not fundamentally a matter of power, but of morality. Both its reason for existing and its subsequent legitimacy are based on the grounding of the ruler in the Truth of *dhamma*. These similarities and the consequences of the differences will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four.

### *The Mahāparinibbāṇa Sutta*

Despite their differences, both the *Aggañña Sutta* and the *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta* take for granted the rule of kings. This is the case throughout nearly all of the Pāli Canon, with the notable exception of the *Mahāparinibbāṇa Sutta*. While the main narrative of the text depicts the final days of the Buddha's life, it opens with a passage on politics. Here the Buddha is seen giving counsel to a minister of a king who has sought the Buddha's advice. King Ajatasattu announces his intention to attack a rival group called the Vajjians. He then sends a minister to go speak with the Buddha and asks him to report back what the Buddha says of the plan. The Buddha makes clear to the minister that he has previously counseled the Vajjians and lists to the ministers the seven principles given to the Vajjians to ensure that "they may be expected to prosper and not decline." These principles were as follows,

1. To hold regular and frequent assemblies
2. Meet in harmony, breakup in harmony, and carry on their business in harmony
3. Do not authorize what has not been authorized, and do not abolish what has been authorized
4. Honor, respect, revere and salute the elder among them, and consider them worth listening to
5. Do not forcibly abduct others' wives and daughters and compel them to live with them
6. Honor, respect, revere and salute the Vajjian shrines at home and abroad
7. Ensure that proper provision is made for the safety of Arahants (enlightened persons), so that such Arahants may come in the future, and those already there may dwell in comfort

While the prescriptions given here by the Buddha certainly don't point to anything like modern liberal democracy, this text has nonetheless been read as supporting a type of proto-republican rule. This stands in stark contrast to the apparent unquestioning acceptance of monarchy found elsewhere in the texts.

The *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* is also interesting in its seeming promotion of the status quo. The *Aggañña Sutta* in particular shows a willingness on the part of the Buddha to question the conventional structure of the social order and makes clear that ancient traditions are not inherently valuable just because of their age. Yet here in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* the Buddha places a special emphasis on both tradition and the respect of wisdom, both gained from time by way of respecting elders and gained from spiritual enlightenment by way of Arahants.

The text gives us some guidance in the hope of understanding this apparent contradiction. As the text continues, we discover that parallel advice is given by the Buddha to his community of monks. They are told to follow this same advice if they wish to prosper and not decline. Interestingly, they are further given more advice relating to the furthering of their spiritual welfare. It can be inferred then that the text contains two separate though interwoven types of lessons, those of politics and those of spirituality. One set, the political, is given to both the Vajjians and the *sangha*, whereas the latter is given only to the monks. There is then a connection, an overlap, between the two communities, although the concerns of the *sangha* are shown to be both deeper and more broad than the merely political concerns of the Vajjians. But while the communities are different, they are linked in the mind of the Buddha. They are similar enough to warrant similar advice, and while the advice given to the *sangha* is different it should be noted the advice given to the Vajjian is wholly included within the advice given to the *sangha* and that the two sets of counsel do not contradict one another.

The importance of this distinction is made clear through a short passage wherein the minister of King Ajatasattu acknowledges what the Buddha has told him. The Buddha, speaking for the first time directly to the minister, tells him that he himself gave these principles to the Vajjians and that as long as those principles remain in force the Vajjians will prosper and not decline. The minister, Vassakara, replies,

Reverend Gotama, if the Vajjians keep to even one of the principles, they may be expected to prosper and not decline- far less all seven. Certainly the Vajjians will never be conquered by King Ajatasattu by force of arms, but only by means of propaganda and setting them against one another.<sup>37</sup>

What this passage makes explicit is that neither did the minister view the Buddha's guidance to the Vajjians as practical political advice on the part of the Buddha for how the Kingdom of Ajatasattu should be run nor was the Buddha intending his message to be conveyed as such. The minister does not say that he will give the list of seven principles given to the Vajjians to his king and that the king will follow it, nor does the Buddha imply that this advice is good for the king. Rather the minister simply says that the king will never be able to conquer the Vajjians as long as they maintain that advice and that their only hope is to corrupt the Vajjian system. There is no implication that the king will nor should follow the Vajjian advice himself.

This is in itself surprising. The Buddha gives a list of seven principles, and makes clear that if the people in question follow these principles they will prosper and not be conquered. That this claim is taken seriously by all parties involved is made clear in the words of the minister. His King will not even bother trying to conquer the Vajjians as long as they maintain these principles. It would seem then that the Buddha has offered the Vajjians a magical political elixir, one that renders them invincible to their foes. Without context, it would seem that this list could

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<sup>37</sup> Walshe, Pg 232.

be the outline for a perfect Buddhist regime. Yet upon hearing these principles, the minister of the king does not jot them down and take them back to his ruler to be implemented, presumably investing their own regime with the Buddha's political invincibility. But why? Why wouldn't any ruler be thrilled to embrace these principles? The minister's reaction makes clear that it isn't because they don't take the Buddha's claims seriously. Taken at his word, it appears quite the opposite.

The clear implication here is that the political advice given by the Buddha to the Vajjians was not meant nor understood to be meant as a demarcation of universal political principles. The counsel of the Buddha was good for the Vajjians, and for the *sangha*, but clearly not intended for the kingdom of Ajatasattu. This distinction is the key to understanding the Buddhist presentation of politics. As a practical matter the Buddha seems to believe that these quasi-republican principles laid out in the *Mahāparinibbāṇa Sutta* are fitting for certain peoples. The implication of the text in particular is that this sort of regime is fitting for those who are either spiritually enlightened or take the project of spiritual enlightenment seriously. This is clearly the case with the *sangha*, but the parallel advice the Buddha gives to the Vajjians indicates that they also meet this criterion. This is made clearer by the implication in principle seven that the Vajjians already give proper provision to the Arahants in their care, and by the implications of principle three that their pre-existing traditions are worth maintaining. Accordingly, the *Mahāparinibbāṇa Sutta* is not a call for the maintenance and continuation of traditions generally but only of those that are worthy, with the standard of worth seeming to be tied to their spiritual standing. The political principles given by the Buddha in the *Mahāparinibbāṇa Sutta* are not broad, general principles for political life, nor are they meant to be understood as such, as the king's minister makes clear.

The Buddha's counsel to the Vajjians was bespoke, or at least tailored carefully in light of their pre-existing condition.

This process of tailoring action to condition should not be surprising when viewed in light of the general Buddhist project. Buddhist political theory closely mirrors the form and approach of the larger Buddhist program. There is no notion of best practices in the Buddhist project of enlightenment. There are methods which work better than others for many, but the process of reaching enlightenment is a radically personalized affair. We see this understanding reflected in the Buddhist understanding of politics. As with the methods to enlightenment, there is equally no best regime. Some regimes work better than others in most circumstances, but the act of governing must be a personalized affair. What sort of rule is fitting for the vulgar may not be fitting for the genteel, much as the Buddha assumes kingship throughout most of the Pāli texts but created an egalitarian *sangha* for his own purposes. This is not evidence of elitism on the part of the Buddha. Rather it is an acknowledgement of pragmatic realities. There is no moral value judgment made because there rightly can't be. To be unenlightened isn't morally sinful, and accordingly to require the strong hand of the king rather than popular rule isn't evidence of weakness, just of mere condition. In this regard, while politics is secondary within Buddhist thought, what political theory there is points clearly to a pragmatic understanding.

The political texts of the Pāli Canon paint an uneven picture of political theory, one that only makes sense when viewed in the broader context of their totality. The *Aggañña Sutta* presents a political understanding where, despite the divisions of the caste systems, people are by and large inherently equal. There are kings, but these kings are not morally superior or unequal to their subjects as a matter of nature. Instead, kings are able to be kings because of their morally



upright actions.<sup>38</sup> According to Moore, “the king’s authority originally arose from the consent of the governed, but it is maintained by the spiritual righteousness of the king.”<sup>39</sup> The *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta* makes clear that the mundane and the spiritual are not separate arenas but instead are governed by the same forces and the same laws and that when the two come into conflict the spiritual holds sway. Accordingly, a spiritually depraved king is a politically illegitimate king.<sup>40</sup> Some guidance for precisely what this kingly spiritual righteousness is to look like is given in both the *Mahāsudassana Sutta* and the *Jataka* texts, a series of writings which are held forth as the retelling of the previous lives of the Buddha. These duties, called the *Dasavidharājadhama* (The Tenfold Virtue of the Ruler), include the donation of alms, proper morals, charity, justice<sup>41</sup>, penitence, peace, mildness, mercy, meekness, and patience.<sup>42</sup>

However, the story is not quite so simple. While the *Aggañña Sutta*, *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta*, *Mahāsudassana Sutta* and the *Jataka Tales* all speak to the nature of kingship, implying its rightful position as the form of rule, the *Mahāparinibbāṇa Sutta* offers evidence that the Buddha did not simply subscribe to notions of monarchy wholesale. In the *Mahāparinibbāṇa Sutta*, the Buddha is giving counsel to a king. The advice he gives, though rather coarse, points softly in the direction of republican rule. This text is not a blueprint for modern democratic rule, but it is at the very least an acknowledgment that monarchic is not the best rule simply. The Buddha further demonstrated his acknowledgement of democratic principles in the nature of the *sangha* which he himself created. The structure and order of the *sangha* created by the Buddha seems to acknowledge the notion that even the Buddha himself was not meant to be a king<sup>43</sup>. The *sangha*

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<sup>38</sup> Jayasuriya, Pgs 56-57.

<sup>39</sup> Moore (2015), Pg 42.

<sup>40</sup> We see throughout this discussion on kingship much that would be quite amenable to Aristotle.

<sup>41</sup> Here, justice is a translation of *ajjava*, literally to be upright. In this context however it refers to honesty. See Chapters Four, Five, and Six for a more in-depth discussion of Buddhism and justice.

<sup>42</sup> Moore (2015), Pg 42.

<sup>43</sup> An obvious contrast is evident here between the Buddha and Socrates’ philosopher-king in Plato’s *Republic*.

did not have a proper leader, and all decisions were made by the group in open meetings, being voted on by all members, both male and female, alike.<sup>44</sup>

This draws an interesting contrast to the clear approval of monarchy found elsewhere by the Buddha. Despite the acceptance of monarchical principles given elsewhere, when creating his own community and political order the Buddha clearly embraced the principles of shared rule. The distinction which needs to be made between the two conditions, however, is the types of men being governed, and more particularly their individual needs. While the Buddha rejected notions of inherent inequality, his advice on political life demonstrates that he accepted the notion that (despite any inherent equality among men) not all are equally suited for identical conditions. The Buddha's blueprint for a legitimized kingship necessitated spiritual righteousness. This is not merely because it bolsters the personal standing of the king, but because it means that his rule will foster a condition which allows (and perhaps even stimulates) righteousness among the people he rules. When we look at the Buddha's own community of monks in the *sangha*, we see the Buddha take a different tack. These men and women are not wanting in spiritual righteousness the way that a general populace would be. They do not require an imposed structure of righteousness in order to foster a condition necessary for enlightenment. The rules of political life are different for them, not because they are inherently better people but simply because they require different things.

Given the priorities made clear through the Pāli Canon, this position points to a fundamentally apolitical stance which flows beneath the surface of the even the most political texts of the ancient Buddhist tradition. Politics, even in those texts where it is brought to the

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<sup>44</sup> Moore (2015), Pg 41.

fore, is presented merely as a tool in service of a larger moral end. While it does not call for a rejection of political life, political life is equally never viewed as a primary good in and of itself. Political thought in the Pāli Canon makes clear that not only should politics be subservient to the spiritual, but that when this is not the case politics is necessarily a danger to society. The origin of violence is not among the people, but from a misguided king. Further, yet while in both the *Aggañña Sutta* and the *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta* the rise of political life is presented as a necessary reality, it is also presented as secondary. In neither presentation is politics the source of order, it is merely a stabilizing force used to maintain it. And even then, its use in this role is contingent on its alignment with *dhamma*. Politics as presented in the texts of early Buddhism is understood as necessary but decidedly secondary. And what politics there is is guided not by mundane concerns but by wisdom, either in the guise of a *cakkavatti* or the actions of a morally worthy community like the *sangha*.

### **Buddhist Political Life**

In seeking to understand Buddhism's pragmatic and apolitical stance, it becomes necessary to examine the relationship of Buddhism and Buddhist practice to political life as we find it. The questions must be raised, given the deflationary stance towards politics present in Buddhist political thought, whether Buddhist thought and practice compatible are with political life and to what degree. Further, if they are compatible, what does their resulting relationship properly look like? The attempt to answer these questions has only recently come into prominence in Western scholarship, alongside the flourishing of the field of comparative political thought. As it currently stands, very little serious thought has been given to the subject of Buddhist political philosophy.<sup>45</sup> However, as a practical matter, having existed for some two

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<sup>45</sup> Moore (2015), Pg 36.

thousand-odd years, Buddhists have been living in and participating in political life to varying degrees for millennia. While little attention has been paid to Buddhist political theory, there is a robust body of literature which examines Buddhist political history and development, as well as the political condition of contemporary Buddhist regimes.<sup>46</sup>

The first meaningful instance of Buddhist political development occurred quite early in Buddhism's history with the Buddha's founding of the first *sangha* from his initial group of disciples. Despite lacking a broad political theory, Buddhism does place a premium on the idea of community, stemming from the Buddha's decision to create the *sangha* as a means to bring together Buddhist practitioners. The term itself has a number of meaning or implications, depending on the tradition in which it is being used. In its oldest sense *sangha* simply describes the proper monastic community of Buddhists. However, in the Mahāyāna tradition, and in much modern usage, this term has shifted and expanded to include the totality of all Buddhist practitioners.<sup>47</sup>

The *sangha* founded by the Buddha, though not meant to be a proper political order, nonetheless gives us some insight into the Buddha's mindset. The Buddha chose to arrange his religious community on the principle of democracy and shared rule. The Buddha, while the religious leader of the community, was not the ruler of the *sangha* in any proper sense. Though it is not hard to imagine that his opinion had a disproportionate influence, decisions in the *sangha* were made democratically, with men and women holding equal standing.<sup>48</sup> Beyond this democratic character, the social order of the *sangha* lacked a formal hierarchy and was blind to concerns like nepotism as a matter of policy to the degree that even the Buddha's own son

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<sup>46</sup> Jayasuriya, Pg 49.

<sup>47</sup> Smith, Huston, and Philip Novak. *Buddhism*. HarperCollins, 2005. Pg 144.

<sup>48</sup> Jayasuriya, Pgs 51 and 53.

received no preferential treatment upon becoming ordained. Instead these relations were governed strictly on the basis of seniority.<sup>49</sup> This stands in contrast with the advice on the constitution of regimes that the Buddha gives in several instances throughout the Pāli Canon, where he explicitly shows favor to monarchies.

The first major development in the political spread of Buddhism came around three hundred years after the death of the Buddha with the reign of King Asoka. Asoka's story and role in Buddhist history is in some ways not dissimilar from that of Constantine in the Christian tradition. Asoka was a Hindu Indian king of the Mauryan dynasty in the third century BCE, with a reputation for harsh rule. Following a brutal conquest Asoka rode into the besieged area and saw the destruction that his war had brought. Buddhist tradition holds that he was so disgusted with the carnage and death that his campaign had created that he renounced his heritage for its war-like nature and instead chose to embrace that peaceful edicts of Buddhism.<sup>50</sup> This story also has clear parallels to the conversion narrative of the Buddha himself, who renounced his opulent life as a prince for a life of asceticism after finally being exposed to the idea of death after decades of remaining sheltered.

Asoka's reign marked a turning point for Buddhism. Though Asoka made no effort to formally convert those over which he ruled, he nonetheless set forth a series of policies and edicts which promoted Buddhist principles. Additionally, he sought to bring his rule into alignment with the *sanghas* of his region, seeking their approval as a proxy for the justness of his rule.<sup>51</sup> Asoka also was influential in setting off the growth of Buddhism from a regional belief system to its current status as a world religion. Beyond his attempts at bringing his rule in line

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., Pg 51.

<sup>50</sup> Maguire, Jack Hosho. *Essential Buddhism: A Complete Guide to Beliefs and Practices*. Pocket, 2002. Pg 44.

<sup>51</sup> Jayasuriya, Pg 66.

with Buddhist principles, Asoka created a series of stone pillars throughout his kingdom (an area which covered almost the entirety of modern-day India, as well as good portions of Pakistan). These giant stone pillars were inscribed with Asoka's edicts on the nature of proper action in line with Buddhist principles. These pillars, several of which survive today, helped to solidify the standing of Buddhism in the region and helped facilitate Buddhism's subsequent expansion.<sup>52</sup>

In the rule of Asoka we find an interesting and concrete example of the inherent tension found in the position of Buddhist political actor, a conception which is seemingly contradictory from within the premises of Buddhist political thought. As a practical matter, Buddhist political thought acknowledges that political action must exist and that someone will need to partake in these activities. It is less apparent, however, how one can rightly both act politically and act as a Buddhist without offending one position or the other. With Asoka, who has come to serve as the preeminent archetype for Buddhist rule and political action, it becomes clear that Buddhist political action is best understood not as political action for its own sake, but action taken in line with Buddhist principles which has a subsequent political effect. Take for example Asoka's relationship with the caste system. Multiple texts in the Buddhist tradition, including the *Aggañña Sutta*, make explicit that a primary feature of the Buddha's understanding of man's relationship to one another is that it must not be governed by these traditional measures, focused on birth or race, but by one's relationship to the *dhamma*. Asoka, following the Buddha, was sensitive to these concerns. It is relayed in the *Asokāvadāna*, an ancient narrative of the life of Asoka, that he addressed the matter of caste directly. But it is not the fact that he chose to address the issue of castes that is revealing, but how he chose to do so. Asoka reveals his understanding of the nature of politics as secondary to the concerns of *dhamma* by declaring that

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<sup>52</sup> Maguire, Pg 44.

“caste may be considered when it is a question of invitation (to a function or dinner) or of marriage but not when it is a question of religion (dharma) as is concerned with virtues.”<sup>53</sup> By choosing to limit the renunciation of the class system to concerns of *dhamma* when implementing the teachings of the Buddha, Asoka reinforced the Buddhist understanding of politics as a secondary concern.

To fully understand this we must rethink our own understanding of the Buddha’s critique of the caste system. From the Western perspective, which has related concerns of class hierarchies and justice since Plato’s *Republic*<sup>54</sup>, the Buddha’s repudiation of the traditional caste system appears to be an inherently political act. However, as Asoka’s actions demonstrate, the Buddhist understanding of politics is capable of viewing these two issues as separated. That Asoka viewed the necessity of renouncing hierarchy in relation to *dhamma* but not in relation to society allows us to see how he understood his role as a Buddhist political actor. His duty is not to change society, at least directly, by banning observation of caste hierarchies outright, but to change the spiritual standing of the men who make up society. Asoka’s actions are political, but only indirectly and not in the way which Western political thought would typically understand political action. The political effects of Asoka’s actions are only felt as secondary reverberations as they are reflected through spiritual changes. The Asokan Buddhist king rules politically by governing man’s spiritual life, not by governing his public actions. Man’s action in society is not seen as the *cakkavatti*’s concern, at least directly. They are the *cakkavatti*’s concern only as a reflection of the spiritual condition that the *cakkavatti* has worked to cultivate. Political action isn’t expressed in the political sphere, but in the moral sphere. Politics, being only a reflection, is necessarily understood as secondary.

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<sup>53</sup> Krishan, Y. “Buddhism and Caste System.” *East and West* 48: 41-55. 1998. Pg 49.

<sup>54</sup> Plato’s *Republic*, Book IV.

The spread of Buddhism in the centuries following the death of the Buddha was characterized by a slow diffusion fostered primarily through missionary interaction. Though Buddhism is decidedly non-proselytizing, movement of Buddhist practitioners over trade routes allowed Buddhist thought to spread from India throughout the rest of Asia and in some instances into Europe, reaching as far as Japan in the East and Greece and Egypt in the West.<sup>55</sup> One key feature of Buddhist political theory, as important in the spread of its early years as it has been to the more recent spread to the West in the twentieth century, is Buddhism's ability to adapt to different contexts. Stemming from a doctrinal indifference towards the particular methods which practitioners use towards the goal of reaching enlightenment, political Buddhism was able to blend and meld seamlessly with the societal and political conditions of the areas into which it expanded.<sup>56</sup> Buddhist politics do not require a fundamental reorientation of the preexisting political structure in order to exist. To the contrary, as regards regime type, Buddhism has been able to pragmatically adapt to any political situation without requiring any meaningful overhaul on the part of either itself or the culture of the area to which it is spreading. The most striking example of this ease of blending is found in the fact that throughout the entirety of Buddhist history no war has ever been fought in the name of spreading Buddhism's teachings.<sup>57</sup> Buddhism makes few waves and draws little attention.

This malleability has led an array of types of Buddhist regimes and political conditions. Buddhism plays a large societal and political role in a number of countries around the world, the most notable being Thailand, Myanmar (Burma), Tibet, Bhutan, Laos and Cambodia.<sup>58</sup> Moore,

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<sup>55</sup> Maguire, Pgs 155-160. Maguire also so goes far to as to claim that Buddhist missionaries reached the Americas nearly a millennium before Columbus (458 AD), having crossed the Bering Strait until eventually ending in Mexico.

<sup>56</sup> Jayasuriya, Pg 43.

<sup>57</sup> Koller, John M. *Oriental Philosophies*. Charles Scribner's & Sons, 1970. Pg 192.

<sup>58</sup> Moore (2016), Pg 43- 61.



in his analysis of these regimes, determines that it is a mixed-bag regarding the actual effects of Buddhism on the nature of the political order. Looking at the transition of these regimes from kingship to republicanism in the modern era, Moore concludes that three regimes were driven to reorient their politics in the name of Buddhist principles (Burma, Tibet, and Cambodia) and three changed for reasons independent of their Buddhism (Thailand, Bhutan, and Laos), with the causes in Sri Lanka remaining indeterminate. While these classifications are overly broad and don't fully account for any number of social factors or historical particularities, they do point in the right direction. Buddhism, as a result of its inherent tolerance towards methods of practice, makes few positive demands on the regimes it inhabits. Separation of church and state rarely becomes an issue as a practical concern, as the Buddhist *sangha* does little to directly entangle itself politically. In the instances where this is not the case, such as Myanmar, the impetus for the mixing of Buddhism and politics does not arise due to calls from within the *sangha* but instead from social or political forces within the country.<sup>59</sup> In these regimes the *sanghas* are considered important to the political process, but only as a means to give guidance and counsel, much as was the case with Asoka.<sup>60</sup> The case of Myanmar will be explored in greater detail in Chapter Five.

One interesting consequence of Buddhism's political and philosophical malleability is in the explosion of Buddhism's popularity in the Western consciousness during the mid-twentieth century. The popularity of Buddhism in the West can be explained by several factors. Damien Keown argues that one key reason for Buddhism's popularity in the West is that Buddhist thought and practice appears to be in line with the defining modern Western conception of tolerance. He believes that those in the West see in Buddhism a preference for liberal ethics and

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<sup>59</sup> Von Der Mehden, Fred. "Buddhism and Politics in Burma." *The Antioch Review* 21: 166-175. 1961.

<sup>60</sup> Jayasuriya, Pgs 45, 63-64.

progressive policies.<sup>61</sup> While this is to a degree a matter of projection on the part of Western practitioners, in practice it is valid. While Buddhism does not inherently understand itself as liberal or progressive, its tenets always allow for (and at times actively promote) these behaviors. This belief is bolstered by Buddhism's promotion of gender equality. Though the Buddhist tradition isn't without failures in this regard,<sup>62</sup> since the creation of the Buddha's *sangha* women have been considered equals as a matter of doctrine and were allowed to participate in the shared rule of the *sangha*. It should be noted however that despite the fact that nearly all contemporary Buddhist political writings now favor ideas such as republicanism, Buddhist thought, both historically and doctrinally, has long held the acceptability of monarchs.<sup>63</sup> While Buddhism may mirror modern Western liberalism in preaching tolerance that does not mean that it also explicitly preaches political liberty.

Buddhist thought and practice is wholly congruent with the modern West, but one should take care to remember that it is not synonymous with it.<sup>64</sup> This point is emphasized clearly in the practices of the Zen tradition. Generally speaking, in comparison to most other sects in the Buddhist tradition, the practices of Zen would at first seem less amenable to Western beliefs. First, Zen practices place an emphasis on hierarchy and the inherent inequalities that come with it. Besserman and Steger correctly note that "it is impossible to maintain the unquestioned authority of a Zen teacher in an egalitarian society."<sup>65</sup> Second, Zen roots its origins in the

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<sup>61</sup> Keown, Damien. *Buddhism*. Sterling, 2009. Pg 184.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, Pgs 185-186.

<sup>63</sup> Moore (2016), Pg 61.

<sup>64</sup> The issue of tolerance, both on the part of the West and Buddhism, was raised in an interesting way around the time of the 2016 United States Presidential election. In Myanmar, a Buddhist monk spoke out about the rise of Islam in the country and the impending dangers to Myanmar which he perceives as inherent in the rise of "Islamization". In this context, the monk praised then newly-elected U.S. President Donald Trump, equating his views with that of the President-elect by claiming that Trump is "similar to me in prioritizing nationalism." Freeman, Joe. "Anti-Muslim Buddhist Monk in Myanmar: Trump 'Similar to Me'." *Associated Press*, 17 Nov. 2016.

<sup>65</sup> Besserman, Perle and Manfred B. Steger. *Zen Radicals, Rebels, and Reformers*. Wisdom Publications, 2011. Pg 207.

samurai culture which preceded it in Japan. Accordingly, Zen Buddhism uses a language and set of customs which are rooted in masculinity and warrior culture. The effect of this has been a devaluing of the role of women in Zen Buddhism as compared to other sects.<sup>66</sup> In this regard, Buddhism's political malleability is a double-edged sword from the perspective of the modern Western liberal, as it proves to be wholly value-neutral, with all adaptations being equal. Yet it should be noted that even in the instance of the Zen tradition, once its practices reach foreign soil, such as in the case of the United States, the pragmatic malleability takes hold. Despite its apparent incongruences with American culture, the popularity of Zen Buddhist practice has exploded in the country.<sup>67</sup> Besserman and Steger observe that once having begun to be practiced in America, this Westernized Zen starts to lose its misogynistic flourishes and take on an air of social justice.<sup>68</sup> In this regard, American Zen is an adaptation of an adaptation, taking on the form of its host as it goes forward. This perhaps more than anything demonstrates the fundamentally pragmatic nature of Buddhism's political theory. Buddhism allows its political expression to change with its surroundings so that its core message can continue to propagate.<sup>69</sup> The issues inherent in the rise of Western Buddhism, particularly its explicitly politically active variant of engaged Buddhism, will be explored in Chapter Six.

We must hold then that Buddhist practice is compatible with politics, at least at a basic level. Yet despite this observation, the situation is not wholly clear. Philosophically, Buddhism seems to direct man towards a rejection of the world, and in some instances politics in particular.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., Pg 208.

<sup>67</sup> Preston, David L. *The Social Organization of Zen Practice: Constructing Transcultural Reality*. Cambridge University Press, 1988.

<sup>68</sup> Besserman and Steger, Pg 209.

<sup>69</sup> Though there are clearly unwarranted negative connotations to the analogy, in this regard Buddhism is like a virus that infects a host but lacks the virulence to kill it. It is thus able to sustain itself within the host, all the while growing yet leaving the host unharmed. This stands in stark contrast to the political aspects of Western traditions such as Christianity. That a Buddhism crusade has never been borne out in history is not coincidental.

One possible conclusion is that the Buddhist who lives in the political sphere is simply living heretically. Putting aside the question of whether heresy is even possible within Buddhist practice, this answer remains unsatisfying. One of the places where we can observe a strong political understanding of Buddhism is within the monastic orders themselves. One will not do well in trying to maintain that these ardent practitioners of Buddhism are inherently heretical simply because they also engage in a form of politics. The apolitical, deflationary stance of Buddhist political thought in the Pāli Canon creates a tension between theory and praxis that is difficult to reconcile within traditional Western understandings of the primacy of political life.

### **Conclusion**

Looking at the totality of the Buddha's prescriptive words on political life we can see a certain pragmatism. The Buddha does not hold any one political order above the other in a vacuum. Instead, political life is to be arranged in accordance to the spiritual needs of the people living within it. For the Buddha's *sangha* this looks a lot like democratic rule. For the society at large, themselves not having the spiritual and philosophic benefits of enlightenment, this requires a more structured political order. The politics of the Buddha then are pragmatic at least insofar as the political order is as malleable as the necessities of spiritual conditions dictate in order to allow people to reach spiritual enlightenment.

Politics is at best a secondary concern within the scope of the greater Buddhist project. The texts of the Pāli Canon make clear that political life must necessarily be understood as secondary to the project of enlightenment, and that political action is wholly instrumental, servicing only the end of enlightenment. Politics is important to human life only insofar as it furthers this goal. If it could be eliminated entirely, all the better, as the burdens and requirements placed on man by political action degrade him the same as any other attachment.

But it would seem that even the Buddha, who places politics at a completely subservient position, acknowledges like Socrates that political life is an unshakeable reality, even if it is only an unhappy distraction to the higher things.

## CHAPTER TWO: HUMAN NATURE AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE STATE

In Chapter One, I examined the importance of the role of the *cakkavatti*, both in theory and practice, to the history of Buddhist political thought. The *cakkavatti* represents the embodiment of Buddhist principles and serves as the means to introduce and maintain these principles within mundane political life. While the texts of the Pāli Canon show that his rule isn't *always* a necessity, the conditions on which this isn't the case are specific and seemingly rare. The texts demonstrate a belief that politics must be beholden to the greater Buddhist project of furthering enlightenment and that for most people in most situations this is best achieved, if not can only be achieved, through the guiding hand of a wheel-turning *cakkavatti*, an embodiment of Buddhist wisdom who rules in line with the Buddhist principles of *dhamma*.

The goal of the next several chapters is to examine the philosophic tension created when this Buddhist political theory comes into conflict with its Western counterpart. While these chapters will focus on political theory, the consequences of this discussion are not merely academic. Beginning in the age of Western colonialism in Southeast Asia and continuing through the age of political self-determination that followed, Buddhist countries and governments have begun to move away from their traditional styles and forms in favor of Western-style governments. The end of colonialism in the mid-twentieth century brought with it a newly regained political autonomy for the Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia. Following decades of rapid, forced attempts by colonial powers to bring about modernization and Westernization, these Buddhist countries were left to arrange themselves politically in whatever fashion they saw fit. This wave of self-determination has brought about a series of Western-style republican regimes and constitutionally limited monarchies mixed with popular institutions. As it stands in the early twenty-first century, all majority-Buddhist countries have adopted systems

of either popular rule or strongly-limited constitutional monarchies, which themselves are in practice frequently forced to acquiesce to popular sentiment.

Of particular interest to the field of political theory is the fact that this transition has taken place seemingly completely devoid of any fundamental reorientation of the political and philosophic underpinnings of the societies in question. Prior to the age of colonialism, the Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia existed in a political condition defined by essentially the same political thought that we find in the Pāli Canon. Governments were led by a monarch, and this monarch would seek to legitimize his rule through an interaction with the *sangha*. Looking at Buddhist political thought as the Buddhist world began and continues to enter the realm of Western modernity, the overwhelming impression is that little of consequence has changed as a matter of political theory since the lessons presented in the early texts of the Pāli Canon. Though there were great changes and adaptations to the beliefs and practices of the general Buddhist project during this period, including the fracturing of Buddhist practice into the three main sects of Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna, there were no fundamental changes to the core of Buddhist political theory. While each sect adapted the political theory of the Pāli texts to its own ends and placed its own cultural and historical elements as key examples of the principles therein, these changes made no attempt to alter the underlying substance of the Buddha's political thought.<sup>1</sup> According to Matthew Moore, “despite the important differences among the various Buddhist sects, it seems clear that throughout the traditional period [the era following the death of the Buddha until the rise of colonialism] the only form of government that Buddhists of all kinds considered a serious possibility for lay society was monarchy, and that all the schools adopted the early ideas that monarchy was the first form of government, that Mahasammata was

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<sup>1</sup> Moore, Matthew. *Buddhism and Political Theory*. Oxford, 2016. Pg 32.

the first king, and that righteous and/or enlightened kings could and should rule according to *dhamma*.”<sup>2</sup> While on one level it is surprising to see so little change over the course of such a long period, the reason underlying this stagnation is likely explained by the overall deprioritization of political life within the scope of Buddhist thought. Because political thought plays such a comparatively small role in the context of broader Buddhist thought, it is easier to understand how this could be the case. Western political thought is dynamic and constantly evolving because the Western mind places such as primacy on the importance of political life within the scope of man’s existence. Because the West views itself in light of its politics, political thought must be made to accord with the contemporary understanding of the world. For Buddhist practitioners, who place no such primacy on the political, the stakes are far lower. Political thought is secondary at best. Issues which Western thinkers immediately place within the realm of the political are organized differently in light of Buddhist principles.

Herein lies the fundamental issue found in the project of attempting to incorporate traditionally Buddhist countries and the Buddhist political theory which underlies and governs their political action into the world of modern Western political life. The history of Buddhist political theory, particularly in comparison to its Western counterpart, is a story of basic continuity with relatively minimal political evolution. As with any historical entity there are different actors and different epochs, but the fundamental theory underlying the practice remains substantially unchanged from the age of the Pāli texts until the beginning of the era of European colonialism. Given the analysis of Buddhist political thought in Chapter One, this is not altogether surprising. Buddhist political thought presents and understands itself as generally unimportant and decidedly secondary to the larger project of achieving enlightenment and

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., Pg 42.



escaping from the cycle of *samsāra*. Buddhist political insights are not presented as arising for their own sake but instead are artifacts and consequences of broader Buddhist thought. With this lack of emphasis established, the reason for Buddhist political thought's lack of growth is clear.

The primary difference in the development of Buddhist political thought in comparison to Western political thought is the lack of a radical philosophic break in the former. Within the history of Buddhist political theory there is no Machiavelli and no Hobbes. While Asoka, arguably regarded as the greatest figure in Buddhist political history, was able to fully harness and apply the tools inherent in Buddhist political theory, he did not in any way alter the structure of Buddhist political thought. He was a political actor rather than a political philosopher. While we see in Asoka's rule an attempt to bridge the gap between wisdom and power, the wisdom Asoka employed emanated from the Buddha and the *dhamma* rather than from his own personal standard. Historically there is no major reorientation of Buddhist political thought from within the Buddhist tradition itself. Instead any substantial reorientation that we see only takes place in light of the effects of European colonialism, and as a result is necessarily colored by the introduction of Western thought.

We find the most concrete example of this effect in the Constitution of Tibet put forth in 1963 by the Dalai Lama following his exile at the hand of the Chinese government in 1959. Prior to the introduction of this new constitution, Tibet had historically been governed by the Dalai Lama as a theocratic monarchical ruler, albeit in the context of other various political powers and circumstances, from around the mid-seventeenth century. Following his exile, the Dalai Lama announced a fundamental reworking of the Tibetan political order, codified in the new constitution, to be enacted upon the reinstatement to power of his Tibetan government-in-exile in the homeland. This new government would be democratic in nature and republican in form,

consisting of a parliament made up exclusively of elected members. Further, this new constitution introduced a variety of principles already familiar to the West, such as several passages guaranteeing due process in both criminal and civil matters, universal suffrage for those over 18 years of age, and the introduction of systems of social welfare. Though this constitution does not formally become enacted until the return of the Tibetan government in exile to Lhasa, following his promulgation of the new constitution and the creation of the exiled administration, the Dalai Lama in practice ceased to hold political authority and instead took on an informal role of educator, working to ready his people to embrace these newly introduced principles.

The rapid transition of Tibet from a long-standing monarchy to republican rule raises a few interesting issues for examining the general transition of historically Buddhist states to Western-style governments in the post-colonial era. The first of these concerns the Dalai Lama's reason for effecting this political transition. While a cynical appraisal could argue that these changes were extremely valuable in allowing the Dalai Lama to be viewed in a favorable light in comparison to his Chinese oppressors in the eyes of sympathetic Western powers, according to the Dalai Lama these changes were part of a preexisting project being undertaken to bring the government in Lhasa in line with modern standards. The constitution opens with a foreword, written by the Dalai Lama himself, explaining the necessity of the changes,

Even prior to my departure from Tibet in March, 1959, I had come to the conclusion that in the changing circumstances of the modern world the system of governance in Tibet must be so modified and amended as to allow the elected representatives of the people to play a more effective role in guiding and shaping the social and economic policies of the State... This takes into consideration the doctrines enunciated by Lord Buddha, the spiritual and temporal heritage of Tibet and the ideas and ideals of the modern world."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The Constitution of Tibet (1963).

As the Dalai Lama makes clear, these changes, though consistent with Buddhist thought, are being enacted in light of the political circumstances of modernity. Though it can only be a matter of debate whether the Dalai Lama would have sought to enact these changes in a vacuum free from Chinese interference, it is certain that the Dalai Lama did not seek to portray these radical changes as violating the precepts of Buddhist teachings despite their wild divergence from both the historical norm and the apparent textual prescriptions of the Pāli Canon.

This, as it relates to the transformation of traditional Buddhist political regimes into modern Westernized states, is the most interesting facet of the contemporary political development of Tibet. Despite the fact that the Dalai Lama single-handedly and nearly overnight transformed the fundamental tenets of the Tibetan political order, this radical change was met with wide support from the citizens in exile, particularly among the young.<sup>4</sup> While there were some forces in the Tibetan society that questioned the Dalai Lama's decision to renounce his political authority, there was no overwhelming political or intellectual pushback against this radical change.<sup>5</sup> While some of this can be accounted for by the fact that the government under the new constitution remained a government-in-exile without a proper territory to exercise its political authority, it is nonetheless quite striking that such a political sea change would be undertaken with such minimal resistance. In this regard, the response to this transition typifies the pragmatic Buddhist stance towards political life.

Despite the largely open attitude of those under the Dalai Lama's control towards the shift to democracy, a general acceptance of these new principles and orders should not be confused with a successful political transition in practice. Some obstacles to the transition are

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<sup>4</sup> Frechette, Ann. "Democracy and Democratization among Tibetans in Exile." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 66: 97-127. 2007.

<sup>5</sup> McConnell, Fiona. "Democracy-in-Exile: The 'Uniqueness' and Limitations of Exile Tibetan Democracy." *Sociological Bulletin* 58: 155-144. 2009.

obvious. One such issue was the need to educate and familiarize the Tibetan people with the newly introduced principles of popular rule. The Tibetan people understandably require an education in the principles undergirding the new constitution in order to stifle the growing pains of the transition, a fact that the Dalai Lama was aware of and undertook in correcting himself to the degree that his exiled status allowed.<sup>6</sup> Though this undertaking has been by and large successful, there is reason to believe that the actual project of the reforming the Tibetan leadership in favor of democratic principles has been less successful. Examining this issue, Jane Ardley notes a number of traditional criteria for democratic regimes that have yet to be met, even fifty years after the beginning of the Tibetan transition. Among these she lists a lack of competitive elections, an absence of party competition, no meaningful political opposition, and the conflicting role of the Dalai Lama as both a political and religious leader. Additionally, the Tibetan government-in-exile has remained hesitant to allow full participation for Tibetans expatriated to Western countries for fear of introducing disunity among the citizenry.<sup>7</sup>

These concerns, though mitigated by the fact that the government remains instituted only in exile prior to a repatriation to the Tibetan homeland, underscore a fundamental issue with the transition of historically Buddhist regimes towards democratic principles and republican forms. Largescale political transitions of this form are nuanced and multi-faceted operations. It is not as easy as a ruler, even one as powerful, charismatic, and well-liked as the Dalai Lama, simply declaring that a regime will take a new form. Deepening the issue, as it regards Buddhist countries, it is also not just a matter of democratization. Building a regime on the notion of popular sovereignty is not solely a matter of creating democratic institutions. Institutions are only

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<sup>6</sup> Frechette (2007).

<sup>7</sup> Ardley, Jane. "Learning the Art of Democracy? Continuity and Change in the Tibetan Government-in-Exile." *Contemporary South Asia* 12: 349-363. 2003.

as meaningful as the actors which comprise them. In the case of historically Buddhist regimes, the movement towards the creation of Western-style states requires not only a reconstruction of existing regimes but a philosophic reorientation as well. The principles of liberalism and popular sovereignty, contrary to Jefferson's pronouncement, are not simply self-evident. The American Revolution took place following hundreds, if not thousands, of years of philosophical and political development. These changes did not arise extemporaneously. They were the result of a millennia-long system of political development, not simply of institutions but of the political actors which comprise them as well. This is a political history which is foreign to the traditions of Buddhist thought and practice.

There is no equivalent to Machiavelli in Buddhist political thought, nor is there an equivalent to the American or French revolutions in Buddhist political history. The changes which have taken place since the political theory laid out by the Buddha in the Pāli Canon have either been minimal corrections around the edges, or in the case of the large-scale changes of recent decades have been reactions to Western political thought rather than revolutions from within the tradition itself. While this is interesting as a matter of history, in attempting to examine the movement of the Buddhist political world into the political sphere of Western modernity this reality takes on a far greater significance. When we look at the movement of the Buddhist political world into the sphere of the modern West it becomes clear that the shift to political modernity in the Buddhist world was a reaction to Western politics and Western political hegemony rather than an actual reorientation within the Buddhist world and Buddhist political theory<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> In Chapter Six, I will examine Engaged Buddhism, the modern conception of political Buddhism which attempts to harness Buddhist principles to the ends of modern liberalism. Engaged Buddhism may attempt to understand itself as a radical philosophic break with past Buddhist political thought but, as I will argue, in reality it is more of an

While this reality may seem unimportant on the surface given that nearly all of the Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia are now all republican in some fashion, we must not allow ourselves to assume that a lack of wake on the surface means that no whirlpool exists down below. Though it may be easy to assume that a transition from kingships based on the rule of the *cakkavatti* and his attempt to further Buddhist principles in favor of a modern system of Westernized governments is a success so long as regimes change their form, this belief fails to acknowledge that governments are more than just their structure. The move in Buddhist politics to replace enlightened kings with modern Western republican-style states doesn't just represent a change in regime types. It demands a reorientation of Buddhist political thought to align itself with these new principles. The issue for political science then is not whether Buddhist countries have chosen to embrace Western-style regimes, but whether they have done so on a stable foundation of political theory. Is it possible to simply graft a modern, Western state onto a political condition and culture which finds its premises foreign? The modern Western state, as first presented by Thomas Hobbes in his *Leviathan*, is premised on a notion of sovereignty wherein individuals, for fear of violent death, relinquish all power, both political and spiritual, to the sovereign authority. This approach takes as assumed a number of concepts which, though not wholly foreign, are understood quite differently within the Buddhist tradition.

The politics of the contemporary Buddhist world and the politics of the modern West are as two houses, seeming nearly identical from the curb but built on two very different foundations. The Western house of political traditions and institutions, having been built slowly from the time of Hobbes and the rise of liberalism is neatly aligned with its bespoke foundation.

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attempt to graft Western political theory and views on the importance of politics onto a Buddhist political and ethical framework rather than a true reformulation.

But the same cannot equally be said for the Buddhist house. The institutions employed across the contemporary Buddhist world are foreign to its tradition, as are the principles upon which these institutions are built. The movement from monarchy to republicanism as the prevailing political order did not find its origins in a reorientation of Buddhist political or social thought but instead in the pressures of post-colonialist modernity. The question I will attempt to answer in the following chapters is whether there is a sufficient grounding within Buddhist political thought to allow this change. Lacking a fundamental reorientation within Buddhist political thought, is a Western facade on Buddhist political life sufficient to allow it to coexist amongst the political life of the West so long as regimes remain republican in form and liberal principles appear to be respected, even if the house is lacking a solid foundation?

### **The Foundations of Political Life**

Western political modernity hinges on the notion of the self. Social contract theory and ideas of the necessity of consent premise themselves on the conception of the individual. Politics is not a natural condition but rather a cognizant coming together of individual persons, each with their own concerns and spirit, to create a better condition than if they were to refuse to do so and go it alone. Political life is an amalgamation of individuals choosing to act in concert for a shared goal. But the result of this coming together of individuals is odd. Though the entirety of the modern Western project is premised on this individuation, its purpose is seemingly to contravene this same premise. As perfectly captured in the frontispiece to Hobbes's *Leviathan*, the state requires a coming together of individuals in order to sublimate these very same into its body.<sup>9</sup> The state in this regard is necessarily a tool for lessening the role and standing of the individual

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<sup>9</sup> Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan: With Selected Variants from the Latin Edition of 1668*. Hackett Publishing, 1994. Chapter XVI, Paragraph 13.

in political life. This holds true even within the liberal state, which seeks to strike a balance between the carnivorous nature of the state in regards to power and a condition of respect for the individual. In this regard the politics of Western modernity are built on a contradiction. They cannot be understood outside of the context of regarding man as an individuated person, but they seek to control the effects of this individuality in order to reach their desired end.

This end is peace. Political modernity, built on Hobbes, takes the ego as its actor and the ceaseless quest to avoid the snuffing of the ego as its motivation. Examining these foundations through the lens of Buddhist thought immediately brings several issues to the fore. In Chapter One I examined the political theory presented in the texts of the Pāli Canon. These texts give a picture of political life as fundamentally secondary within the scope of greater Buddhist thought. Within the confines of Buddhist thought, man is not compelled to act politically nor is political action fundamentally necessary to achieve the desired goal of enlightenment. There is a role for politics within the scope of man's life, but it is more an occasionally necessary nuisance that can be avoided whenever possible than a useful tool in its own right. This is in direct contradiction to the Western understanding of politics, which places political life at the fore. This has been the case since the philosophy of Greek antiquity, which understood politics as natural and went so far as to classify man as a political animal.<sup>10</sup> Though the modern political tradition originating in the thought of Thomas Hobbes jettisons much of the ancient tradition, it maintains the primacy of the role of politics within the larger scope of man's being, albeit regrounding its justifications for believing so.

Though its present ubiquity may make it appear otherwise, the modern state is not a natural entity nor did it begin its existence in the form we now find it. Its foundations rest on the

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<sup>10</sup> Aristotle. "The Politics." in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. Richard McKeon ed. Modern Library, 2001. 1253a1-3.



reorientation from the political thought of antiquity undertaken by Thomas Hobbes, and its development has taken place within the context of the development of liberal thought. The state as the primary unit of political life finds its origins in the social contract theory of Hobbes. In positing a pre-political condition from which man is compelled to escape, Hobbes constructs a new foundation for political life. Rejecting the ancient understanding of political life as natural, Hobbes reformulates its origins, building political life *de novo* as based on contract and consent. The Leviathan he creates is an all-encompassing conception of the state. In order to escape the dangers of the state of nature men contractually sacrifice their rights to one another, granting authority to a sovereign who then holds a monopoly on force and law. The power of this sovereign is seemingly absolute. His realm is the political, but through Hobbes's clever maneuvering the political itself becomes all-encompassing, comprising both the temporal and the spiritual realms.

Yet though the formulation of the state that Hobbes constructs holds an all-encompassing authority over those who have contracted to create it, we also find within Hobbes's thought the seeds of a force which places some restraints on the power of the state over individuals, that of liberalism. Hobbes in founding his political theory on contract implicitly lays the groundwork for future liberal thought by premising his thought not on community or society, but on the individual. Though Hobbes believes the necessity of holding partner to the social contract to be inescapable for these individuals, the proto-liberal formulation of a politics based on consent that he presents nonetheless laid the groundwork for the expanse of liberal thought which would follow. His influence is further felt in laying the foundation of government not as a function of duty or virtue, but of rights. These two competing yet complementary forces serve as the foundation for Western political thought in modernity.

Modern Western political thought maintains the primacy of politics by viewing it as the only meaningful tool to maintain a widespread condition of peace. By making its highest end the avoidance of death and understanding the creation of political life and the state as the only viable means to accomplish this end, modern political thought acknowledges the primacy of political life. This unassailable primacy placed on the inherent value of the political consequently forces modern political thought to shape its psychology, epistemology, et cetera to fit this mold. In the remainder of this chapter I will examine the consequences of these Western understandings and how they align with Buddhist thought. On one level this comparison must be understood in relation to Buddhism's comparatively apolitical stance. Buddhist political thought is first and foremost *Buddhist*, with political concerns only following this fact. This deprioritization of politics in favor of metaphysics gives Buddhist political thought a nimble and fluid quality that is lacking in its comparatively rigid Western counterpart. But because Buddhist political thought is directly subservient to the larger Buddhist project, these comparisons cannot be made in a vacuum.

Beyond their respective presentations of human nature and psychology, Buddhist thought presents a meaningful challenge to the presentation of the foundations of political life presented by Hobbes and the modern West. Hobbes's political thought is a story of individuals coming together to escape violent death. Buddhist thought rejects both the subject and the motivation of Hobbes's formulation out of hand. The Buddhist principle of *anatta* (no-self) denies the existence of a meaningful category of "individualism" as it is understood in Western thought. Going beyond merely denying the existence of anything like an individuated "soul" or spirit, the principle of no-self posits that our conception and experience of a persistent self are ultimately illusory. Flowing from this denial of a coherent and permanent self-hood, Buddhist

thought further posits a denial of the Western conception of death through the foundational notion of rebirth. Death serves as the psychological catalyst in Hobbes's political theory. It is able to accomplish this task because of the finality of death as Hobbes presents it. Man fears a condition of violence and death because the stakes are so high within it. Buddhist thought negates this concern. Though death is also an ever-present concern to the Buddhist practitioner, death here lacks a notion of finality. Within the Buddhist conception of history and temporality, death does not signal the end of existence itself but instead the beginning of a new period within existence. Death is intrinsically paired with life and rebirth in the eternal cycle of existence. Though the Buddhist project, like that of Hobbes, seeks to escape death, it does so in a completely different fashion. Hobbes's project seeks to remove man from a condition of violent death in order to ensure that man may live. Buddhist thought wishes to remove the prospect of death entirely through the achievement of enlightenment, so that man can be released from the cycle of *samsāra*. In removing the element of temporality from death, Buddhist thought guts the moral imperative from Hobbes's call to political life, and in doing so, leaves Hobbes without a grounding for his project.

Buddhist thought offers a serious critique of the foundations of liberal political thought as a matter of first principles. By denying the existence of an individuated self to serve as the building block and removing the fear of death to justify the process, Buddhist thought negates the premises of the political thought of Western modernity and Hobbes's formulation of the foundations of the state. The result is that it becomes difficult to justify the conclusions of the modern West on Buddhist terms. The most striking of these is the liberal insistence of the fundamental importance of the individual and his rights in political life. Buddhist political thought does not root itself in a tradition of individualism, nor does it view the category as

particularly meaningful. When coupled with its deflationary stance towards the importance of political life within the scope of man's being, the contours of Buddhist life little resemble that of the West. Whereas the political thought of Western modernity takes the individuated person as its subject and understands politics as the primary tool necessary to ensure his safety and fullest expression, Buddhist thought views both of these claims as transitory and fleeting. Buddhist thought understands itself as an attempt to allow man to view the illusory nature of both the individuated self and importance of material, corporeal existence. Buddhist political thought serves only to further this greater project.

### **Human Nature**

In order to understand the ends of political life, we must first understand its foundations. This is true not only of the structure of society or government, but also of the goals and psychology which underlie the project. Buddhist thought and Hobbesian thought are divided at an extremely primary level by way of their orientation regarding the question of how man and his actions should be understood within the larger scope of reality. While exceptions exist within both, Hobbes and Western political thought orient themselves as outward-facing whereas Buddhist thought seeks to look inward. This is not merely a matter of epistemology, but instead is premised on the primary objective of each enterprise. The Hobbesian project, moving man out of the state of nature and into a political condition, is undertaken with the goal of achieving peace. Politics in this arraignment is an inherently social tool. While its impetus may be found in the internal drive for survival of each person contracting into political life, its understanding of politics is as a tool for transforming society for the sake of societal ends.

In comparison, Buddhism, both in its religious and political aspects, points man inward. Setting aside for now the modern, politicized reformulations of socially-engaged Buddhism, the

goals of Buddhist thought emphasize reform of the spirit rather than reform of society. Even when we see political life presented as a tool for societal change, it is meant to be used to reform society for the sake of creating the conditions necessary to further man's enlightenment rather than for its own sake. This is not to deny that Buddhist thought, and Buddhist political thought in particular, does make certain calls for a reformulation of society. This much is clear from the texts of the Pāli Canon. There are instances where society needs to be reconfigured in order to create a condition wherein enlightenment becomes possible. But even in these instances, the changes to society are not made for the sake of the betterment of society or the creation of a political community *per se*. These changes are viewed as necessary only in the context of the greater Buddhist soteriological project. Whereas Hobbes places peace, a societal goal, as his motivation, Buddhist thought views society only as instrumental to its larger project of enlightenment. Though some texts seem to imply that true personal enlightenment is not obtainable without a concern for the enlightenment of others in society, even here the ultimate end still points inward even when the means look outward. While Buddhism may not solely be focused on the inward, its instrumental view of politics saddles it with a sort of political quietism which is decidedly distinct from the political thought of Hobbes.<sup>11</sup>

One main consequence of this differentiation in outlook has been the divergence in what precisely constitute the proper tools available for crafting a political life. The Hobbesian formulation, maintained throughout political modernity, has been an understanding of the political as based on power and control. By viewing politics as a mechanism to actively craft and create social change, Hobbes laid the groundwork not only for the rise of bureaucracy and technocracy but equally for the fascist and state-controlled communist regimes of the twentieth

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<sup>11</sup> Faure, Bernard. "In the Quiet of the Monastery: Buddhist Controversies over Quietism." *Common Knowledge* 16. 2010.

century. The groundwork for the state and the absolute authority granted to his sovereign served to point Western political thought in a direction of politics understood as control. Through Hobbes we see the origins of the coalescence of both authority and violence into the hands of the state.

This, on its face, is not wholly unlike the story of the origins of politics presented in the *Aggañña Sutta*. There we see the people also enter into something like a social contract. They come together to grant the *Maha-Sammata* (The People's Choice) the power of punishment. And as with Hobbes's presentation of the state of nature, this coming together is spurred by an understanding that life has gotten so unbearable that the introduction of state-sanctioned violence (insofar as the term is rightly applicable) is necessary to bring society out of its tailspin. But there is one key distinction between this presentation of the creation of organized authority and that of Hobbes. The coming together presented in Hobbes facilitates the creation of a sovereign authority. This authority accomplishes the goal of removing man from the state of nature, but it does so by neutering much of what makes man what he is. Following the creation of the state, Hobbes's sovereign authority is not merely absolute but further becomes all-encompassing of man's spirit. The authority granted to the sovereign is not absolute merely because Hobbes views this level of power a necessary to keep man from returning to the state of nature. The sovereign's powers are so great because we must recognize the actions of the sovereign as our own. Man and the state become intrinsically intertwined. The state is thus not merely a political body, but a spiritual body as well.

This sublimation of man into the state runs contrary to the political teachings of Buddhism. In the presentation of the Pāli texts, the exact opposite seems to be true. Rather than viewing it as necessary to bridle man to the degree that the state holds an interest in controlling

his spiritual personage, the Buddhist presentation makes clear that it is political life which remains subservient. Even though both are presented as a means to escape a deleterious pre-political condition, Buddhist thought never reaches the Hobbesian conclusion that the pre-political state is so dangerous that man must sacrifice his soul to the state in order to escape it.<sup>12</sup> Quite the opposite, the creation of political life in Buddhist thought is presented as a necessary development only in order to allow man's spiritual elements to thrive outside of a political condition. We can see this teaching made manifest in Asoka and the Asokan model of governance which came to bear his name. Contrast this with the Hobbesian understanding of the relationship of religion and the state which brings the transcendent under the control of the mundane.

Though this division expresses itself within the political realm, its origins are centered not merely on political concerns but rather on the disparate presentations of human nature found in each tradition. By beginning with differing understandings about the nature of man, Buddhism and Western modernity reach wildly different conclusions about the purpose of political life. For Hobbes, the very creation of political life is meant as a means to control the irredeemably harsh character of man. Buddhist thought, though beginning its presentation with an equally cynical presentation of human motivations, views man as inherently recoverable. The political state in this formulation is not meant as a means to control for bad behavior, but as a means to provide the context necessary for its redemption.

The political theory of Thomas Hobbes is explicitly built around the idea of accounting for man as we find him. His mechanistic understanding in *Leviathan* provides the method from which to view his presentation of political life. Though man is driven by reason, this is not

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<sup>12</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chapter XLII.

necessarily a high-minded reason like that of the Greeks. Hobbes's proto-evolutionary conception of man places his instincts on a very base level. He lays this understanding out in the Epistle Dedicatory of *De Cive*, "I obtained two absolutely certain postulates of human nature, one, the postulate of human greed by which each man insists upon his own private use of common property; the other, the postulate of natural reason, by which each man strives to avoid violent death as the supreme evil in nature."<sup>13</sup> Reason in Hobbes's presentation is not a tool of enlightenment, but a tool of survival.

Hobbes's presentation of human nature is decidedly pessimistic. The pre-political society Hobbes describes is a reflection of the unencumbered man found in the state of nature. This "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" condition exists because of man's apparent inability to exist peacefully when left to his own devices.<sup>14</sup> This has led to a perception of Hobbes's understanding of human nature as primarily characterized by self-interest. To a degree this is true. Insofar as man's primary drive, as Hobbes makes clear, is to avoid death then man must be concerned with his own self-interest. This drive is so strong that it not only necessitates the creation of the political state but the mere possibility of returning to the condition of violence renders the escape from political life an impossibility for Hobbes.

Yet even with the pessimism stemming from this obvious primacy placed on greedy self-interest, the picture of humanity that Hobbes paints contains nuance. While the necessities (political and otherwise) of man's self-interest are great, Hobbes does not believe that they are reliable enough in practice to account for a full picture of man. Though Hobbes finds fear of violent death a sufficient motivator to bring man into a political condition, he also acknowledges

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<sup>13</sup> Hobbes, Thomas. *On the Citizen*. Edited by Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne. Cambridge University Press, 1998. Dedicatory Letter.

<sup>14</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chapter XIII, Paragraph 9.



the scattershot collection of secondary drives which all too often seem to override man's self-interest. Challenges to man's rational self-interest are provided by, among other things, the love of glory, the love of one's own, or the love of one's god.<sup>15</sup> Man in this estimate is a base animal, but one that is occasionally capable of surprising its observer. He is driven by desires, the most frequent and reliable being the avoidance of pain and death, but the scope of his gaze occasionally rises higher.<sup>16</sup> The leviathan state Hobbes creates reflects this.<sup>17</sup> It is not surprising then that Hobbes builds a state so absolute so as to draw these concerns into its gravity.

Man in this formulation is fundamentally a creature driven by desire, be it desire to protect one's self, a desire for glory, or the ultimate desire to escape death. Even reason is a tool to this end, as rational action is linked to self-interest. This discussion of desire draws us back to Buddhism. In his description of the human condition, the Buddha also draws desire to the fore. In his presentation of the Four Noble Truths in the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, the Buddha places desire (*taṇhā*) as the origin of *dukkha* (suffering).<sup>18</sup> This relationship is the catalyst of the Buddhist understanding of existence. Whereas *dukkha* defines the Buddha's understanding of reality, desire is that which defines man's being. Man is, above all other things, a creature which desires. These desires or cravings distract him from a true understanding of existence and force him to abstract himself as apart from existence. In this regard, desire is intrinsically linked to the illusion of man as individualized.

Though the Buddha understands man as driven by desire, thus igniting the reaction which culminates in the never-ending cycle of death and rebirth (*samsāra*), it is less clear that Buddhist

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<sup>15</sup> McClure, Christopher Scott. *Hobbes and the Artifice of Eternity*. Cambridge University Press, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chapter XV, Paragraph 21.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter XVIII, Paragraph 15.

<sup>18</sup> Bhikkhu Bodhi. "The Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta" in *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Samyutta Nikaya*. Wisdom Publications, 2003.

thought understands man in a cynical or pessimistic light. Even though the origins of man's folly are rooted in his own nature as a desirous creature, Buddhist thought still maintains a generally positive view of man. This tension is well demonstrated by Trevor Ling in his dissection of Buddhist society.<sup>19</sup> Ling brings out this tension by subtly drawing a distinction between the Buddhist understanding of man's nature in the abstract and the Buddhist presentation of man's nature as seen through his actions. He begins by claiming that "In Buddhist philosophy, human nature is seen as fundamentally good rather than evil."<sup>20</sup> But he then goes on just a few pages later to describe the picture of man given in the Pāli texts as addicted to pleasure, enthralled by the eye with objects that charm, ravenous, greedy, and controlled by his desires. He is murderous and petty.<sup>21</sup> This decidedly does not seem like a presentation of something that is fundamentally good rather than evil.

The distinction here which Ling makes, and which is supported throughout the writings of the Buddhist tradition, is that though this description of man may be true it is equally not a permanent sentence. Ling describes the process of studying and living in the *dhamma* as akin to refining gold, a slow process of working away the impurities of a coarse substance.<sup>22</sup> Buddhism then is not necessarily bullish on the standing of man as we may find him, but it firmly believes in his redeemability. This is the very project that the Buddha describes. Man is a creature which creates its own condition of suffering, but for the very reason that he himself creates it he is also able to correct it. He does so through the reorientation undertaken by living in line with *dhamma*.

It is here that we can see the particular contrast between the premises of the Buddhist project and that of Hobbes. Both begin with a reasonably similar picture of man. He is a creature

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<sup>19</sup> Ling, Trevor. *The Buddha*. Grover Publishing, 1985.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, Pg 125.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, Pg 134.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, Pg 125.

driven by desire, and if these desires are left unchecked the society which he inhabits will be unbearable. Accordingly, something must be done to correct this condition. But from this shared premise, the two schools of thought diverge. Buddhist thought places its corrective course of action in the teachings of the *dhamma*. In doing so it places the power of transformation at the personal and spiritual level. Man must reorient himself if he is to escape the condition of torment and suffering that is created through his desire. Remove the desires, remove the suffering.<sup>23</sup>

### **The Foundations of the Modern Western State**

Hobbes moves in another direction. Whereas Buddhist thought turns inward to remove the causes of suffering, Hobbes faces outward and views the only proper means of accounting for man's desires as coming through political life. We can see here another expression of the fundamentally different understanding of the primacy of political life between the Western and Buddhist traditions. Hobbes lacks the inherently optimistic view of man found in Buddhist thought. In the Hobbesian view, there is no reconstruction or reorientation of man's nature that would be both possible and sufficiently corrective to allow for an escape from the deleterious conditions of the state of nature. Buddhism calls for an elimination of desires, but Hobbes observes that this may not be possible. Even the high points of man's nature that Hobbes observes, such as the setting aside of one's own immediate self-interest in the name of glory or religion, are still examples of desires in action. The desire for glory may be nobler than the desire to avoid death, but they are both drawn from the same human drive. In this way, if both the high and low of man begin from the same place and are expressed in fundamentally the same way then any attempt to reorient man away from an existence defined by his desires is futile.

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<sup>23</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chapter XIII, Paragraph 14.

Though Hobbes premises his thought on the individual, he then quickly does all that he can to immediately de-individualize the individual and throw him into a political condition. He views man as an individual, but only insofar as he is an individual amongst other individuals. This is the grounding of the primacy of political life in modern Western political thought. Through his denial of any possible internal or personal correction to man's nature, Hobbes necessitates the creation of the state as the only viable means to create peace. Buddhist thought and practice equally seeks peace, but find its achievement rooted in an alteration of man's internal condition rather than his external condition.

A particularly interesting insight shows itself when looking at the Buddhist notion that this correction cannot be originated externally of man. Hobbes also makes this distinction between things internal and external to man, and he does so in the context of religion. In the second half of the *Leviathan*, Hobbes examines the role of ecclesiastical power in relation to the state. Throughout his discussion it becomes clear that though the two bodies are separate and distinct in their natures, they resemble each other quite closely as it regards form and substance.<sup>24</sup> This is the primary problem that Hobbes must address, not only in relation to religion but seemingly in relation to his ability to harness man's will within the state.

Religious spirit is seen as dangerous by Hobbes because of its radically personal and internal nature. It is impossible to properly police a man's spiritual belief. This creates a problem for Hobbes because of the connection he seeks to make between his sovereign and man's morality. Good and evil are not only found in the will of the sovereign, Hobbes further argues that they do not even come into existence prior to the creation of the sovereign. It is for this reason that religion presents such a great problem for Hobbes. In making its own moral claims,

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<sup>24</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chapter XLII.

religion inherently undermines the sanctity of the sovereign power. To allow this is to allow competing claims of authority, and doing so negates Hobbes's claim to the absolute authority of his sovereign.

Hobbes's solution is to attempt to cut the legs out from underneath religious authority. He does so, however, not by attacking religious belief directly but by seeking to negate the power of religious institutions. Yet even here he does not attack the standing of religious institutions in and of themselves. Rather than attempting to remove the religious institutions within from his commonwealth, Hobbes attempts to control for their effects by bringing the power of their influence under the control of his sovereign. He accomplishes this in two ways. First, Hobbes creates a layer of removal between the citizens and the moral standing of their actions. He makes clear that though the sovereign may be powerful his control ends at a very definite point. He can compel man to action, but he cannot compel him to belief. The sovereign, he writes,

cannot oblige men to believe, though as a civil sovereign he may make laws suitable to his doctrine, which may oblige men to certain actions, and sometimes do such as they would not otherwise do, and which he ought not to command; and yet when they are commanded, they are laws; and the external actions done in obedience to them, without the inward approbation, are the actions of the sovereign, and not of the subject, which is in that case but as an instrument, without any motion of his own at all, because God hath commanded to obey them.<sup>25</sup>

This is important to Hobbes's overall plan to bring the power of the spiritual under the umbrella of the state because it makes clear that though there is a division between man's belief and his action, in practice the power of the sovereign is such that this distinction begins to lose its meaning.<sup>26</sup> Hobbes here is taking the moral bite out of the conflict of the orders of the sovereign and the orders of religious practice. Though man may view a distinction between acting in

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., Chapter XLII, Paragraph 106.

<sup>26</sup> Oakeshott, Michael. *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*. Liberty Fund, 1992. Pg 272.

accordance to belief and acting in accordance to law, Hobbes argues that there is no real inherent conflict between the two. Man acting in accordance to the sovereign authority is not doing so contrary to his beliefs, even when the actions taken are contrary to those said beliefs. Even in contravening, he is doing so as an instrument rather than as a moral actor. Though he may be taking the action, his actions are not his own. And though this may not seem like a meaningful distinction to the reader, it is important to look at what this would mean in practice. Hobbes here is carving out a space for morality which seems to be meaningful in a fundamental way.<sup>27</sup> Man can believe as he will. But in reality, taken to its logical conclusion, the space for private morality that Hobbes carves out is very minimal. It is so small in fact that it would seem to reside only in a man's head and heart. His body, however, must act in accordance with the laws of the sovereign. What appears to be an acknowledgment of the limits of the sovereign's power doesn't seem to be that limiting at all. As a matter of practice, man is nonetheless compelled to obey, even if Hobbes allows for his moral absolution.

Hobbes is able to sufficiently reconcile man's morality with the power of the state. Man is allowed perfectly private morality and religious belief, though his actions are at times subject to compulsion. But this is only half of the equation. Having accounted for moral actors, Hobbes must also make account for the external institutions of morality. In order to accomplish this end, Hobbes seeks to subsume the teachings of religion unto the sovereign.<sup>28</sup> We find here in Hobbes the origins of the liberal idea of religious toleration, but unlike John Locke, Hobbes does not extend this notion to the idea of a separation between the church and the state. In reality, Hobbes's project is to align the two so closely that the lines between the two begin to blur.

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<sup>27</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chapter XLII, Paragraphs 9 and 29.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter XLII, Paragraphs 67-70.

Hobbes accomplishes this project of blurring ecclesiastical and political power through a dissection of what precisely it means to be sovereign. Hobbes justifies his claim that religious authority must be subsumed into the state on the grounds that both the church and the state are fundamentally the same sort of institution. Both are elements which makes claim to having primary jurisdiction over man and his being. The issue arises in that it is impossible within Hobbes's logic to maintain both a separate political and religious authority. We are left to imagine a situation wherein there is a political sovereign who is separate from the sovereign ruler of the church. In this instance, it is the case that either the political sovereign holds authority over the ecclesiastical power or he does not. If it is the former, then the conversation is rendered moot as the sovereign already holds dominion over the church. But if it is the case that the sovereign does not control the religious authority, he and the party that does hold this religious authority must regard themselves as enemies. If this is the case, then any citizen, in keeping with his allegiance to the sovereign which he helped create, must deny any claims of authority held by the church due to his fundamental and pre-existing allegiance to the political sovereign.<sup>29</sup> In constructing a sovereign which is not only granted absolute authority, but further is mandated to retain its standing via the moral duty of man to not fall back into the state of nature, Hobbes has brought the ecclesiastical under the purview of the political. Though both the church and the state make moral demands upon man, it is only the state which makes a demand upon him which would require a violation of the natural law to transgress. The result, as described by Eldon Eisenach, is that

the category of 'church' dissolves into Hobbes' state, leaving no religious content whatsoever, except the bare injunction to obey the sovereign. Religion would then become an entirely personal affair, its only institutional marks being a multitude of ever-

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<sup>29</sup> Martinich, Aloysius P. *The Two Gods of "Leviathan": Thomas Hobbes on Religion and Politics*. Cambridge University Press, 2002. Pg 280.

shifting voluntary sects, each headed by ministers with no legal authority.<sup>30</sup>

This aligns perfectly with Hobbes's corollary project of justifying to man the ability of the sovereign to compel him to act against his moral precepts. In this formulation, the moral duty of obeying the sovereign (under threat of returning to the state of nature) far outweighs any moral sentiments that man might hold, religious or otherwise. Ultimately, this is all that matters to Hobbes. He is unconcerned with convincing man towards particular beliefs. The only belief that he must instill upon man is that he must never return to the state of nature. Hobbes then is concerned at the most primary level only with action, leaving matters of faith to the side.<sup>31</sup> As long as a religion maintains a basic conformity to the state, Hobbes allows for religious toleration.

This idea becomes echoed and expanded in the development of liberal thought. Hobbes lays the foundation for the idea of religious toleration, albeit at the service of a decidedly illiberal project. On the subject of religious toleration, Hobbes and John Locke disagree on principle but arrive at the same conclusion as a matter of practical effect. Hobbes, though creating a sovereign with seemingly limitless authority, carves out a particular place for private religious practice, so long as this religious action doesn't interfere with or contradict the sovereign authority. This isn't a positive endorsement of private religious practice, but it is a type of religious toleration all the same. John Locke, and the liberal tradition which follows him in this regard, regrounds Hobbes's conclusions on toleration, placing an emphasis on the irreconcilability of the church and the state. Where Hobbes sought to bring the two together, Locke understands them as necessarily separate, seeking to "distinguish exactly the business of civil government from that of religion,

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<sup>30</sup> Eisenach, Eldon. *Two Worlds of Liberalism*. University of Chicago Press, 1981. Pg 62.

<sup>31</sup> Curley, Edwin. "Hobbes and the Cause of Religious Toleration." in *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes's Leviathan*. Edited by Patricia Springborg. Cambridge University Press, 2007.



and to settle the just bounds that lie between the one and the other.”<sup>32</sup> Writing in his *Letter Concerning Toleration*,

It is not my business to inquire here into the original of the power or dignity of the clergy. This only I say, that, whencesoever their authority be sprung, since it is ecclesiastical, it ought to be confined within the bounds of the Church, nor can it in any manner be extended to civil affairs, because the Church itself is a thing absolutely separate and distinct from the commonwealth. The boundaries on both sides are fixed and immovable. He jumbles heaven and earth together, the things most remote and opposite, who mixes these two societies, which are in their original, end, business, and in everything perfectly distinct and infinitely different from each other.<sup>33</sup>

This reformulation represents a substantial movement away from Hobbes. Whereas Hobbes denied the impossibility of two spheres of sovereign power, Locke’s writing on toleration makes clear that he views the coming together of both powers into one sphere as the impossibility. “The care of souls,” he writes, “cannot belong to the civil magistrate, because his powers only consist in outward force; but true and saving religion consists in the inward persuasion of the mind.”<sup>34</sup> This Lockean insistence on the separation of the spheres of religion and the state, regarding religion as a private concern, has come to define the view of Western modernity, and the principles of free exercise of religion and the formal separation of the church and the state have become nearly synonymous with the liberal project. This understanding that it is outside of the purview of the state to care for the soul has enabled the rise of pluralistic liberal society in the age of democracy. Individuals are allowed private belief, but as with Hobbes the practice of these beliefs cannot be made to conflict with the sovereign, civil order.

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<sup>32</sup> Locke, John. *Treatise of Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration*. Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1965. Pg 171.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, Pg 184.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, Pg 172.

In Hobbes and Locke, we see the two strains of thought regarding religion in the political thought of the modern West. Though they are founded on different principles, they arrive at the same position, and in complementary fashion. Through Locke we see the origins of the liberal attempt to relegate the spiritual and the political into separate spheres. The resulting effect is that neither is able to speak with or act on the other in any meaningful way. This has allowed the rise of the liberal principle of the free exercise of religion, but it has also had the corollary effect of removing any element of transcendence from society and political life. By negating the transcendent elements of the church, modern political thought has removed any value that the church could have to offer in political life.

This vacuum however has not been left unfilled. While liberal thought has succeeded in separating the religious and political spheres, the ideas set forth in Hobbes's *Leviathan* have provided a replacement to fill this void. In his project of bringing the spiritual into the dominion of the state, Hobbes promotes a reconceptualized spirituality in the guise of a civil religion.<sup>35</sup> He acknowledges throughout the *Leviathan* that man is not able to be wholly divorced from the spiritual. His concern then is not to stamp out these elements, but to reconfigure them in a way that can be useful to his state.

### **The Sangha and the State**

The project of Western modernity is defined by the way it negates and segregates the elements of transcendence within society. Religious belief is made a private affair, and as a result

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<sup>35</sup> Within the context of liberal modernity, the result has been an exaltation of the ideas of democracy and popular sovereignty as the philosophic conceptions underlying the fabric of liberal society. This civil religion based on the notion of fundamental equality helps to justify and reinforce the modern political obsession with hierarchies within political life. The liberal project, particularly as it has matured in contemporary political life in the age of Progressivism, takes as one of its primary objectives the breaking down of hierarchies. It accomplishes this through the use of the state as a tool to enforce the liberal notion of equality. In this way, the morality of the state is enforced by the apparatus of the state, exactly as proposed by Hobbes in the *Leviathan*.

is lowered in importance in relation to the state and political life. Hobbes decidedly succeeded in his project to create an understanding of the primacy of political life to man's salvation. The project of salvation itself is made to be accomplished by political ends. He further succeeded in his attempt to subsume the elements of religion in society to the power and institutions of the state. This reformulation serves as the underlying basis for the modern liberal understanding of the relationship between the state and religious beliefs and institutions.

Buddhist political thought fundamentally rejects any and all of this Hobbesian formulation. The texts and tradition of Buddhist political thought offer no exaltation of the state over the spiritual. In reality, it is quite the opposite. Looking at the political texts of the Pāli Canon and the political actions of those who have applied it, it becomes clear that Buddhist political thought does not seek to alienate the spiritual from the political. Buddhist political thought views these two spheres as necessarily intertwined, rejecting out of hand the premise of Locke's claim that the civil authority "neither can nor ought in any manner to be extended to the salvation of souls."<sup>36</sup> But, as with the West, Buddhist political thought does not view these two spheres as wholly equal. Whereas the Western tradition places a primacy on the political, relegating spiritual concerns to matters of private practice, Buddhist political thought seeks only to understand itself within the context of the Buddhist soteriological project and Buddhist thought generally. The political and spiritual are incapable of being unentwined, and as a result the state can never be understood outside the context of the *sangha*. The Buddhist political project begins by mixing what Locke claims to be "perfectly distinct and infinitely different,"<sup>37</sup> jumbling heaven and earth together in the inextricable connection of *dhamma* and political life.

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<sup>36</sup> Locke, John. *Treatise of Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration*. Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1965. Pg 172.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, Pg 184.

Buddhism doesn't deny the necessity of politics, but it does view its importance as fundamentally different than does Western political thought. We saw with Hobbes that the first and only means to correct man's nature was through political life and the state that facilitates this process. Buddhist thought views political life as tool to achieve this same end, but only as an ally in a different project. Political life in Buddhist thought serves as a guide or a tool to aid in the project of internal transformation. Politics exist, and can be important if the circumstances warrant, but it will always be viewed as secondary in a way that modern Western political thought denies at its first principles.

What remains to be seen is what this understanding of the nature of politics and political life looks like when applied in practice. David Cummiskey offers an elegant dissection of the two primary historical and philosophic approaches to Buddhist governance.<sup>38</sup> He lays out a division between the Asokan model of top-down kingly governance and the Shambhalan model of rule emanating from the wisdom of the *sangha* of Buddhist practitioners. These divisions are not arbitrary, nor are they merely facets of Buddhist political theory. The origins of this distinction begin in the Buddhist teaching of the Three Treasures. Buddhist teaching on the Three Treasures presents them as the three fundamental tenets of Buddhism in which adherents can take refuge or upon which they can rest their belief. Traditionally, these are presented as the Buddha (enlightenment), the *dhamma* (truth, regarded as the teachings of the Buddha), and *sangha* (the community or society built around Buddhist practice). Of particular interest in relation to Buddhist political theory is the fact that these Three Treasures can alternately be translated and understood as the Buddha, the Law, and the Order.<sup>39</sup> In this formulation we can

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<sup>38</sup> Cummiskey, David. "Comparative Reflections on Buddhist Political Thought: Asoka, Shambhala, and the General Will." in *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy*. Edited by Steven Emmanuel. John Wiley and Sons, 2013.

<sup>39</sup> Mizuno, Kogen. *Basic Buddhist Concepts*. Kosei Publishing, 1987. Pg 39.

see the political expression of the key tenets of the Buddhist presentation of its own principles. *Dhamma* here is understood as truth. In its political conception it is equally understood as the law which governs proper action. In this same way, the *sangha* is not merely a religious institution. In addition to its religious value, and only because of its religious standing, the *sangha* serves the corollary role of providing a basis for ordering society. Given the inherent connection between Buddhist practice and Buddhist society, they cannot be conceived of as unintertwined, and it is through the *sangha* (understood not solely as monastic communities, but as the wider breadth of Buddhist practitioners) that this connection is expressed. In light of these Three Treasures, the two modes of Buddhist governance serve not merely as two arbitrary conceptions of the ordering of political life but instead as expressions of Buddhist thought made manifest into political action.

Both the Asokan model and the Shambhalan model have precedents in the texts of Buddhist political thought as well as in Buddhist political practice. The textual outline for the Asokan model is expressed primarily in the *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta*. Here we see laid out both the contours of what proper Buddhist political rule should look like as well as a narrative of the justification of its necessity. The fundamental facet of the Asokan ruler is that his reign is taken in line with *dhamma*. The narrative of the *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta* is that of a king who seeks to rule by his own accord rather than in line with the wisdom of the *dhamma*. The result is the creation of a life which is not only defined by violence, but further wherein society is shown to crumble and collapse to the degree that it ultimately resets under the strain of the immorality introduced by the faulty king. In its assessment of the deficient ruler, the text makes clear that his downfall is precipitated by his unwillingness to have *dhamma* “as your badge” and take it “as

your master.”<sup>40</sup> In emphasizing the importance of *dhamma* to the just rule of the monarch, the text also makes clear precisely what these admonitions to hew himself to *dhamma* entail. The process of interacting with *dhamma* is not one of merely personal reflection. In order for the monarch to fully and properly align himself with the *dhamma* he must align himself with *sangha*. “From time to time you should go to them,” the *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta* admonishes the monarch, “and consult them as to what is wholesome and what is not unwholesome...and what action will in the long run lead to harm and sorrow, and what to welfare and happiness.” This, we are told, “is the duty of an Ariyan wheel-turning monarch.”<sup>41</sup>

Proper action for the Buddhist monarch is to rule in line with *dhamma*. This means not simply for the ruler to align his own individual action with the *dhamma* but to undertake his action in consultation with the *dhamma* as represented through the *sangha*. But the Asokan model is not simply a theory of governance gleaned from texts. Its namesake and prototypical actor is the Buddhist king Asoka. Drawing his cues from the presentation of just rule in the Pāli texts, Asoka set an example of rule which created the template for political rulers in the Theravāda tradition from his reign in the third century BCE until the movement towards democracy in the Buddhist world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries CE.

Asoka’s governance was characterized by his attempts to adhere to Buddhist principles. This meant an attempt to limit violence to the greatest degree possible, a policy of religious toleration, and, in keeping with the prescriptive advice given in the *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta*, the provision of a very basic set of social protections. Further in keeping with the lessons of the *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta*, Asoka sought to maintain the legitimacy of his reign, both political and spiritual, through a close relationship with the *sangha*. This entailed not simply consulting

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<sup>40</sup> Walshe, Pg 397.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

with the *sangha*, but also included supporting the *sangha* through the founding of monasteries and the construction of *stupas* (traditional dome-shaped Buddhist shrines), emblazoned with Buddhist teachings and edicts explaining Asoka's intentions and his understanding of the teachings of the *dhamma*.<sup>42</sup> Cummiskey summarizes the political lessons of Asoka and the basic contours of the Asokan model of governance as follows,

trust the people, provide social services that secure their basic needs, and treat them with compassion; support the Sangha, for it preserves and teaches the Dharma; defend the innocent against all transgressors (but never with hatred or malice); deter and prevent aggression when possible; recognize and acknowledge the harm to the victims of aggression; and punish but also forgive the transgressors.<sup>43</sup>

The ancient Asokan model of governance offers a model of rule which calls for the creation of order and the maintenance of justice through the hand of a benevolent and righteous king. Power is controlled centrally; political power in the hands of a king who seeks to rule in line with the demands of *dhamma*, and spiritual power held in the hands of the formal religious communities of the *sangha* who seek to guide the king in the act of governing. This top-heavy understanding is contrasted with the Shambhalan model of government, which seeks to decentralize the elements of power based on the belief that the best way to create a just society is through the creation and rule of an enlightened citizenry. The Shambhalan presentation of governance is named after the mythical kingdom of Shambhala in Buddhist mythology, a land built on enlightenment and compassion which enabled it to exist in peace and harmony. With its emphasis on community and compassion, this understanding of Buddhist political thought is favored, in practice if not also in name, by many Western Buddhists and proponents of socially-

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<sup>42</sup> Tieken, Herman. "The Dissemination of Asoka's Rock and Pillar Edicts." *Vienna Journal of South Asian Studies* 46: 5-42. 2002.

<sup>43</sup> Cummiskey, Pg 17.

engaged Buddhism, emerging in popularity around the 1970s. Though the Shambhalan paradigm is itself contemporary, it seeks to ground itself in ancient Buddhist practice, and there is some textual evidence, albeit mixed, for this form of governance in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*. There the Buddha speaks of the rule of the Vajjians, a society which rules itself according to quasi-republican principles such as the holding of regular assemblies and an apparent maintenance legal precedent. This society of self-ruled individuals is held up by the Buddha as unconquerable, thus implying their moral and virtuous value.

On Cummiskey's account, Shambhalan Buddhism is best understood in opposition to the rigid strictures of the formal institutions of traditional Buddhist political theory. Beyond seeking to seat power outside the hands of a monarch, Shambhalan thought also seeks to divest religious authority from the formal *sangha*. The basic goal of the Shambhalan project is make Buddhism compatible with contemporary existence, both in practice and in theory. According to Chogyam Trungpa, the originator of the Shambhalan paradigm, "the basic message of Shambhalan teaching is that the best of human life can be realized under ordinary circumstances."<sup>44</sup> In this regard, Shambhalan thought represents a sort of democratization of Buddhist practice. Unlike the strict formal measures employed in traditional Buddhist political thought and action, Shambhalan practice is built on the notion that political power is able to be decentralized because Buddhist wisdom itself is also able to be decentralized. In light of the deprioritization of the formal institutions of the *sangha*, in regards to both spiritual and political matters, Shambhalan thought emphasized the promotion of mindfulness in the general populace by way of meditative practice. However, unlike much traditional meditative practice which was meant as a means to foster a disconnect between the practitioner and the mundane world, the meditation employed by

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<sup>44</sup> Trungpa, Chogyam. *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior*. Shambhala Press, 1995.



Shambhalan practitioners (as well as many Engaged and Western Buddhists generally) is meant to serve as a means to cultivate engagement with the world itself. Cummiskey, on this form of meditation, writes,

Like the monastic approach, the key to greater enlightenment is the practice of insight meditation. For Engaged Buddhists, however, meditative practice is not distinct from other daily activities; it is instead a distinctive form of engagement with all daily activities: eating a meal, brushing one's teeth, answering the phone, working in a factory. Any form of work or activity can provide the basis for meditation and greater mindfulness. Engaged Buddhism is aimed at living every day in a more enlightened, non-aggressive, and compassionate way.<sup>45</sup>

The ultimate goal then of the Shambhalan model and the theories of socially-engaged Buddhism which employ it is to create a condition wherein Buddhist principles can be applied directly to everyday experience. On a personal level, this is expressed in the calmed spirit attained through practices meant to promote mindfulness. On a political level, this is found in the attempt to link Buddhist practice and political action through a recognition of shared condition found in Buddhist compassion and the promise of the diffused availability of the wisdom found in the adoption of meditative practice.

The project of bringing Buddhist practice into the political sphere through Shambhalan and Engaged Buddhist thought is premised on a rejection of old Buddhist political orders in favor of a politics that more closely aligns with contemporary standards. Evidence for the doctrinal consistency of this practice, contrary to several thousands of years of observed Buddhist political history, is frequently cited as existing in the friendly tone with which the Buddha approaches the quasi-republican practices of the Vajjians in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*. It is undoubtedly true that the Buddha speaks quite highly of the practices of the Vajjians in the

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<sup>45</sup> Cummiskey, Pgs 9-10.

*Mahāparinibbāṇa Sutta*, declaring that as long as they maintain them they will never be conquered. But looking back on the reading of the text given here in Chapter One, it should also be noted that the praise of the Vajjians given by the Buddha was not without context. In the text of the *Mahāparinibbāṇa Sutta* it is the case that this sort of political and social practice was praised but decidedly not put forth by the Buddha as a universally best form of political life. Despite his praise, nowhere in the *Mahāparinibbāṇa Sutta* did the Buddha suggest that the practices of the Vajjians should be adopted by the interlocutors of the story let alone universally. Instead it was made clear that the practice of the Vajjians were good *for the Vajjians*, and in particular, were good for them because they maintained a certain level of moral standing.<sup>46</sup> Though the Buddha seems to speak well of self-governing principles, he only does so in light of the wisdom possessed by those who employ them. This makes them suitable for the morally upright Vajjians, as well as (in modified form) for the *sangha*, but not for the king in the text who seeks political advice from the Buddha.

The question which arises in light of this reading regarding the Shambhalan paradigm is whether this condition can be met in modern society. If the Buddha only favors self-rule within the context of a condition of general enlightenment and moral virtue, where does that leave the Shambhalan model as a matter of practicable implementation? Though Shambhalan thought does address this issue of the necessity of diffused wisdom as a prerequisite for its standing through the promotion of meditation among its practitioners, it is less clear how this condition would be met within the context of a general political condition. While the goals of Shambhalan thought are at least conceivable within the confines of a practicing Buddhist society, they would seem

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<sup>46</sup> Walshe, Maurice. “The Mahāparinibbāṇa Sutta.” in *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Digha Nikaya*. Wisdom Publications, 1995. Additionally see ““The Mahāparinibbāṇa Sutta” in Chapter Two of this dissertation.

wholly untenable with the context of a modern, pluralistic political condition. If the qualifications for the adoption of self-governance within Buddhist thought are a general condition of wisdom, what exactly is the tipping point for this condition, and can we rightly expect this threshold to ever be met in a political order where people are free to order their own lives as they see fit? Unless nearly the entirety of a society were Buddhist, and faithful practitioners at that, the widespread mindful awareness necessitated by Shambhalan thought would seem unachievable. As such, it seems unlikely to expect a condition of general wisdom to emanate from a pluralistic society. These conditions are likely to be met only in a society which is both intellectually homogenous and mandated to remain so.

It is not then just a matter of enlightenment. It is a matter of liberties. Can a society of this sort maintain itself if people are left to choose their own best way to live (here's to hoping they choose a life of compassion!) or must this society be predicated on a mandate that men live in line with Buddhist principles? It would seem, overwhelmingly, that it must be the latter. In that the mechanism for this enforcement would be the state, this would not only violate the fundamental tenets of liberal society but further would begin to resemble a condition that doesn't appear much different in principle from the top-down rule of the enlightened Buddhist monarch applied in a new form. The Shambhalan paradigm rejects the necessity of the rule of the enlightened Buddhist monarch in line with the wisdom of the *sangha* in favor of an understanding of political rule as possible through the diffused wisdom of the greater body of Buddhist practitioners. But in practice, in order to actually maintain the homogeneity necessary to sustain this theory into a matter of political practice, the Shambhalan model must be coupled with a state strong enough to ensure it.

Despite trying to frame itself as otherwise, this tension within Shambhalan thought when attempting to put its principles into political practice underscores a primary facet of Buddhist political thought. Buddhist political thought, be it ancient or modern, is fundamentally only intelligible from within the context of Buddhist thought and practice. In the case of either Buddhist paradigm of rule, a realization emerges that though they are concerned with the creation of a just society, this understanding of justice is only able to be understood from within the context of a Buddhist framework. Though the methods of the Shambhalan account of Buddhist government initially present themselves as based on ideas of self-rule, it becomes clear that this is merely self-rule within the confines of certain predefined parameters which are established by the contours of Buddhist principles. These Buddhist paradigms of rule cannot be made to fit neatly within the tenets of the liberal notion of human flourishing as defined by self-governance. Explicit in the Asokan model and necessary, though obscured, in the Shambhalan model, Buddhist political thought must be understood first as Buddhist before it is understood as political. Accordingly, man within this understanding must concern himself first with the demands of being a Buddhist before he seeks his own understanding of how best to live. If we believe that the tenets of Buddhist thought and Buddhist rule are such that society would be better constructed were it hewn in by these parameters, then so be it. But it remains less clear that this sort of regime can be constructed within the boundaries of the prevailing liberal principles of modern Western thought.

### **CHAPTER THREE: THE INDIVIDUAL IN POLITICAL LIFE**

In his formulation of political life, Hobbes begins with the understanding that the primary unit of political analysis is the individual. His presentation of the state of nature is that of a war of all against all, individual against individual. The coming together in contract to escape this wild state is undertaken by individual actors. Even the contract itself is not understood as being made between the people and the state, but solely by individuals contracting together with other individuals. The idea that there is an intelligible entity conceived of as “the self” is a key, if understated, premise of Hobbes’s political thought. We see this premise carried on, again so fundamental to the project that its certainty is rarely directly questioned, in the subsequent tradition of liberal thought that would be built on Hobbes’s back. Liberalism as a system of thought begins with the notion that political life is to be structured in such a way as to allow for the full flourishing of individuals. It is from this notion that the liberal notions of rights and liberties flow.

#### **Buddhist Thought and the Idea of the Self**

Buddhist thought presents a challenge to this understanding on a number of levels, both political and epistemological. The language of rights and liberty is foreign to the political thought of the Pāli texts. Moreover, we do not see an introduction of this conceptual language into the discourse of Buddhist political thought until after the age of colonialism. Even today, the language still seems muddled. While the rise of engaged Buddhism has brought with it a large number of discourses on the connection between Buddhist political thought and concepts such as human rights, little if anything has been said about the connection of Buddhist politics and individual rights. While some of this lack of attention can be attributed to a general preference among contemporary thinkers to favor discussions of human rights over individual rights

generally, far more of this deficit can be accounted for by the lack of conceptual compatibility between Buddhist political thought and the notion of individuality emphasized by the Western tradition of political thought. This difference stems not simply from political philosophy but instead from the ontological and epistemological premises of Buddhist thought itself.

At issue is the concept of *anatta*, or the theory of no-self. *Anatta* holds a place of primacy within Buddhist thought, being first developed in the primary texts of the Buddha's early sermons in the Pāli Canon. Within these texts we find developed the idea of *tilakkhaṇa*, or the Three Marks of Existence. According to the Buddha, these three truths which define the nature of existence are: *dukkha*— that our experience of existence is defined by suffering; *anicca*— that all things are impermanent; and *anatta*— that all things are without self. Within the context of a comparative study of Buddhist political thought and the political thought of the modern West, it is this last idea, that the concept of the individual is without meaning, which is the most salient.

The Buddhist theory of no-self is articulated, both directly and indirectly, throughout the Pāli Canon. The theory is best understood within the broader context of the Buddhist theory of self. The Buddha frames the idea of *anatta* within the presentation of a division between matter (*rūpa*) and mind (*nama*). However it is important to note that though the Buddha maintains this distinction, he equally maintains that they are indivisible and can only be rightly understood in their aggregation.<sup>1</sup> This aggregated totality of being he refers to *khandā*. Insofar as Buddhist thought has an understanding of an individualized self its presentation is found as *khandā*. But it should be noted that this presentation of the self is decidedly different from that of the West. The primary difference lies in the fact that the Buddhist ontology does not acknowledge a proper state of “being”, instead understanding existence solely as a function of becoming. Existence and

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<sup>1</sup> Malalasekera, G.P. “The Status of the Individual in Theravada Buddhism.” *Philosophy East and West* 14:145-156. 1964. Pg 147.

being are in a constant state of flux. As with many metaphors employed in Buddhist thought this understanding is frequently discussed in relation to a flame. The continuous self exists only in the way that we understand a continuous flame to exist. Though the flame itself may appear to be a singular and continuous object, we acknowledge that its substance is ultimately fleeting and that at any given moment the flame that we see has arisen from the flame that we once saw but that it is not the same flame itself. There is an unbroken continuity but there is a lack of permanence all the same. This metaphor is continued in a number of different ways. The self, or more exactly the human insistence of the recognition of the self, is a result of the constant feeding of the fuel of desire necessary to maintain the flame.<sup>2</sup> To eliminate the fuel is to allow the candle to be snuffed, hence the term *nibbana* (Sanskrit: *nirvana*) as the final end of the Buddhist project of enlightenment, meaning to blow out or quench, as with a flame. To reach enlightenment is thus to cease to provide fuel for the flame of existence. Equally the metaphor of a flame can help make sense of the seeming incongruence of the simultaneous Buddhist denial of a permanent self but the maintenance of the baggage of *kamma* (Sanskrit: *karma*) throughout the process of rebirth. How can it be that there is no permanent and continuous self but that the accumulated effects of our actions, understood as *kamma*, persist from one life to the next? It is explained that the maintenance of the self through *kamma* is like the act of lighting one candle with another. Though we acknowledge that the flame of each candle is separate and distinct from the other, they each stem from the same source and in this way though they are equally impermanent they nonetheless maintain a continuity.

The Buddhist concept of *anatta* is best understood as a response by the Buddha to the prevailing Hindu teachings of his day of *atta*. *Atta*, or self, was understood as “a spiritual

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

substance that, in keeping with the dualistic position in Hinduism...retains its separate identity forever.”<sup>3</sup> In its normal usage, the term *atta* was not used primarily in a religious context but rather in everyday parlance as a pronoun to reference various “selves”, such as myself, herself, ourselves, etc.<sup>4</sup> Prior to its adoption by the Buddha the term did not carry any metaphysical baggage, referring only to the self in the sense of “daily life.”<sup>5</sup> In this regard, the confrontation of the idea of *atta* served as a way for the Buddha, and subsequent Buddhist practitioners, to both contextualize themselves in and differentiate themselves from the thought of the dominant Brahmanical traditions of the time. The Buddha, though a radical thinker, seemed to understand the value and necessity of tradition in the formation of belief. According to Hugh Nicholson, “In seeking to invert the norms of a hegemonic Brahmanical order, however, early Buddhism generally employed a more oblique strategy. More often than not, Buddhism chose to redefine, rather than reject outright, key Brahmanical terms and concepts, such as *brahmana*, *dharma*, *arya* (noble; a member of one of the “twice-born” *varnas*), and *karma*.”<sup>6</sup> *Anatta* (via *atta*) is a prime example of this.<sup>7</sup> Through grounding his teachings in the language of pre-existing social structures, the Buddha was able to forge a meaningful intellectual and social identity for his teachings without unnecessarily alienating those who would be able to do damage to his project. This sort of protection would be particularly useful given the radical critiques of the traditional hierarchical social order set forth in the Buddha’s teachings.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Smith, Huston, and Philip Novak. *Buddhism*. HarperCollins, 2005. Pg 54.

<sup>4</sup> Walshe, Pg 30.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Nicholson, Hugh. “The Spirit of Contradiction in the Buddhist Doctrine of Not-Self.” *The Journal of Religion* 92: 31-57. 2012. Pg 39.

<sup>7</sup> *Anatta* is literally a negation of the Pāli translation (*atta*) of the Sanskrit term *atman*, meaning self.

<sup>8</sup> Steven Collins alludes to this in his work on *anatta*, *Selfless Persons* (1982). Here he lays out a case that the concept of *anatta* served a number of different functions, both social and religious. Though its use as a religious doctrine is clear, he argues that this usefulness is mostly limited to devout practitioners of the faith. For the vast majority of early Buddhist practitioners, the rejection of the “self” was far more useful as “an intransigent symbolic opposition to Brahmanical thought.” (Pg 77) This claim is bolstered by Walshe’s (1995) placement of the Buddhist



It is difficult to conceive of the idea of no-self (*anatta*) from within the Western tradition, not only because it runs so contrary to the traditional conception of the Western self but equally because the concept, even within the Buddhist tradition, is obscure and esoteric. The idea of *anatta* seems to run contrary to the common-sense perception we see around us. This in turn leads to a difficulty in describing the concept without resorting to mere abstractions. Traditional definitions of *anatta* mirror that of Trevor Ling, who describes it as the idea that the “permanent, unchanging ego is a fiction.”<sup>9</sup> Descriptions of this sort falter in that they fail to adequately differentiate a distinction between the idea of the ego as an abstraction and ego as personality. Simple observation by even the most ardent Buddhist practitioners will show that man exists as an individuated, personal creature. In an attempt to account for this reality, Zen scholar Alan Watts attempts to reformulate the idea of the self and *anatta* as extending beyond the realm of simple consciousness. He writes of *anatta*,

the *anatman* [the Sanskrit translation of *anatta*] doctrine is not quite the bald assertion that there is no real Self (*atman*) as the basis of our consciousness. The point is that there is no Self, or basic reality, which may be grasped, either by direct experience or by concepts...The Buddha’s view was that a Self so grasped was no longer the true Self, but only one more of the innumerable forms of *maya* [illusions which veil the underlying nature of reality]<sup>10</sup>. Thus *anatman* might be expressed in the form, “The true Self is non-Self,” since any attempt to conceive the Self, believe in the Self, or seek for the Self immediately thrusts it away.<sup>11</sup>

In this formulation, the principle of *anatta* does not deny that individuated man, each with a distinct personality and ego, exists as a functional matter. What the principle of *anatta* does deny

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understanding of the self, or the lack thereof, in the realm of convention (*sammuti-sacca*). This reinforces the idea that though Buddhist thought may not directly contain a great deal of normative political theory, it nonetheless has at least some political grounding, as evidenced both by the Buddha’s personal rejection of the political life of his family and the teachings of the Pāli Canon, which critique the traditional social orders of the Buddha’s time.

<sup>9</sup> Watts, Alan. *The Way of Zen*. Vintage, 1989. Pg 111.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., Pg 38.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., Pg 47.

however is that this egoism that we perceive aligns with a true understanding of reality. This is an acknowledgement of the Buddhist preference for becoming rather than being. That which we experience and call the “self” in common language is real insofar as we perceive it, but it is indicative of an incorrect understanding of the true nature of existence. The reality of the nature of existence is only found in the enlightenment which comes from reaching a condition of no-self, at which point we are released from the cycle of *saṃsāra*. Accordingly, it should not be surprising that we have a difficulty in conceiving of the condition of no-self. As Watts acknowledges, we are only able to take this action in our standing as “selfed” beings. To attempt as an ego-laden being to conceive of a reality devoid of ego is necessarily a contradiction. Nonetheless, it is the only avenue we are afforded. Accordingly, Buddhist thought cannot simply reject the ego as a practical instrument, but only as an abstraction in relation to the true nature of reality. Stephen Batchelor, attempting to give some guidance on the complexities of the issue, offers the following,

Gotama [The Buddha] did for the self what Copernicus did for the earth: he put it in its rightful place, despite its continuing to appear just as it did before. Gotama no more rejected the existence of the self than Copernicus rejected the existence of the earth. Instead, rather than regarding it as a fixed, non-contingent point around which everything else turned, he recognized that each self was a fluid, contingent process just like everything else.<sup>12</sup>

The importance of the doctrine of *anatta*, as well as the nature of its confusing abstraction, is best seen in relation to *kamma*. *Kamma* is the active agent which powers the cyclical process of *saṃsāra*. Much of the difficulty of properly conceiving of the idea of *anatta* arises from the fact that Buddhist thought simultaneously maintains that both no self exists and yet that the tortured nature of existence is premised on the inability of man to escape from a

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<sup>12</sup> Batchelor, Stephen. *Confessions of Buddhist Atheist*. Spiegel and Grau, 2010. Pg 133.

cycle of rebirth that continues even through the death of an individual. *Kamma* is the means through which these seeming incongruences are reconciled.

*Kamma* literally translates to “action,” and in this regard is best understood as the cumulative effects of man’s actions as either in line or against the *dhamma*. Tun Myint describes it as “the sum of the consequences of intentions and actions taken in previous days, weeks, months, and years.”<sup>13</sup> It is tempting, though ultimately misleading, to understand *kamma* in this way solely as some sort of cosmic scorecard which one maintains throughout the process of death and rebirth. *Kamma* is better understood as a force which trends in the direction of man’s actions, drawing and leading him along with it.

The easiest way to understand the effects of *kamma* is through the lens of the problem of reconciling the no-self idea of *anatta* and with the idea of *kamma*, which seemingly is only intelligible in light of a meaningful maintained self. John Snelling offers a very descriptive analogy which helps to both explain the mechanism of *kamma* as well as clearly show how these seemingly contradictory notions can be reconciled. He writes,

It is rather like a billiard ball flying across the green baize of a billiard table. It hits another ball and that ball canons on at a speed and in a direction that owes something to the first ball (and also to other incidental factors), but it does not take away anything material or essential from the first ball.<sup>14</sup>

From this analogy we can also see the reason for the rejection of the language of reincarnation by Buddhist scholars in relation to *samsāra* in favor of a description of the process as a rebirth. In the Buddhist understanding of the maintained self through the process of death and rebirth, there is an understanding of abstracted continuity that is absent in an understanding of reincarnation.

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<sup>13</sup> Myint, Tun. “Buddhist Political Thought.” *The Encyclopedia of Political Thought*. Edited by Michael Gibbons. John Wiley and Sons, 2015. Pg 2.

<sup>14</sup> Snelling, John. *The Elements of Buddhism*. Element Books, 1990. Pg 48.

This is not a matter of a singular person being reborn in a new form, but a new being coming into existence who maintains the cosmic directionality of its past expression.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, though Buddhist thought does not outright deny the existence of individuated persons, at least as a practical matter, as is sometimes claimed, it is important to recognize that the deprioritization of the ego-laden self and the denial of its ultimate importance to the nature of reality is not without its consequences. The result of this deprioritization is a general lack of concern within Buddhist thought for the Western conception of the individual, particularly in the political sense emphasized by the liberal tradition. Unlike in the tradition of Western modernity, no special privilege is shown to the standing of individual persons in society and individual actors in political life. “In the Buddhist view,” writes Trevor Ling, “it seems that the concept of individuality which is primarily and most emphatically denied is that of the private-property-owning individual.”<sup>16</sup> Even though Buddhist thought recognizes the existence of the individual as a practical matter of existence, it does not recognize its importance as a political category. As a consequence, Buddhist political thought is capable of conceiving of people serving as political actors but does not place an inherent value in their actions in this capacity.

### **The Self in Modern Western Political Thought**

The Buddhist theory of no-self is in near total contradiction to the theory of self which underlies Western liberal political thought.<sup>17</sup> We see the origins of this modern premise again in

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<sup>15</sup> The greatest exception to this conceptual preference is the Dalai Lama. Though the Dalai Lama speaks of the process as one of rebirth, he is understood as the last in a chain of incarnations.

<sup>16</sup> Ling, Pg 127.

<sup>17</sup> In *Buddhism and Political Theory* (2016), Matthew Moore examines the relationship between Buddhist *anatta* and the theory of self presented by Friedrich Nietzsche. Here he finds a great deal of overlap. He concludes that though both agree that the presentation of the permanent and continuous individualized self encompassed in liberal thought is ultimately incorrect, Nietzsche is never willing to go as far as the Buddha in arguing that we should let go of the concept of the self altogether. Unlike the Buddha, Nietzsche argues that the notion of the self should be “relativized but not abandoned.” (Pg 85) In this regard the Buddha is likely more radical than any major thinker of the Western tradition.

the thinking of Hobbes. In crafting the end of his state, Hobbes takes as his guide the nature of his subject. His subject is a radically individualized presentation of man. Hobbes arrives at this subject not simply through an assessment of psychology, but additionally through a general mechanistic understanding of reality.

Hobbes, and the liberal modernity that would flow from him, attempts to understand man as an atomized being, a creature of motivations which are both rational and self-interested. For Hobbes, in a proto-Darwinian fashion, these two categories are essentially unable to be disentangled. This picture of man is a reflection of his scientific, mechanistic epistemology. He opens the *Leviathan*, a decidedly political work, with the claim that “life is but a motion of limbs.”<sup>18</sup> Man in this presentation is not to be understood from his highest functions but his most base realities, as mere matter in motion.

We see this further reflected when Hobbes introduces the idea of man’s passions. Here we see a rejection of Aristotle, who noted the damaging effects of the passions on political life. Whereas Aristotle deemed young men unfit for political life because of their unbridled passion<sup>19</sup>, Hobbes takes passion not as a flaw of the young but as a characteristic of all. Giving a picture of man as a creature directed by his desires, Hobbes not only destigmatizes man’s passions within the context of political life, he takes them as its foundation. At least in this regard, Hobbes and Buddhist thought share a common belief. For both, desire is the catalyst which creates the harsh condition from which man must escape. For Buddhism, the line is clear and direct— desire leads to cravings, and cravings beget suffering. Remove desire and one has removed the causes of suffering. For Hobbes the causal chain, or at least its corrective, is slightly more convoluted.

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<sup>18</sup> Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan: With Selected Variants from the Latin Edition of 1668*. Hackett Publishing, 1994. Introduction.

<sup>19</sup> Aristotle. “The Nicomachean Ethics.” in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. Richard McKeon ed. Modern Library, 2001. 1095a.

Hobbes agrees that man is a creature of desire. The primary desire, the one that trumps all others when the cards are down, is that of self-preservation. This tenacious grasping at self-preservation leads to a condition of violence when left unabated. It is here where the stories of the two traditions diverge. Where Buddhist thought seeks to eliminate the cause through a correction of man's nature, Hobbes seeks merely to control it. Hobbes, lacking the belief of transcendence present in Buddhist thought, is forced to sacrifice man to the state, seemingly for his own good.

It becomes clear in the opening chapter of the *Leviathan* that man is nothing more than a scientific unit of analysis for Hobbes. Though he gives a detailed presentation of man's psychology, man is not his proper subject.<sup>20</sup> The study of man and the study of politics are separate for Hobbes. The study of man and the world he inhabits are a derivative of the study of physics because the defining characteristic of man is that he is best understood as a material being rather than a spiritual being. For Aristotle, man was half human, half divine. Machiavelli tells us to be half man, half beast.<sup>21</sup> For Hobbes, man is neither. There is no true distinction between man and the world around him.

From this we can begin to see the foundation of the individualism of Hobbes and Western political modernity. The consequence of Hobbes's mechanistic presentation of humanity is a radical equality. As a result of Hobbes's lowering of man to a machine of base drives, he is further able to claim that all individuals, at least at a basic level, are equal in their powers. Within the context of his state of nature theory, this becomes expressed in the idea that every person is equally capable of killing another.<sup>22</sup> As it regards the state of nature, this is not only a substantial claim but ultimately represents the most primary type of equality. It is only because of this equal

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., Introductory Epistle— "I speak not of the men, but (in the abstract) the seat of power...".

<sup>21</sup> Machiavelli, Niccolo. *The Prince*. Trans Harvey Mansfield, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. The University of Chicago Press, 1998. Chapter XVIII.

<sup>22</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chapter XIII, Paragraph 1.

capability to inflict violence that Hobbes is able to justify the necessity of his act of state creation. Were this not the case, if some group within the state of nature were able to sufficiently remove themselves from the threat of violent death, they would not by Hobbes's standards be required to submit themselves to political life. The creation of Hobbes's Leviathan thus hinges on this equality. The necessary consequence of this however is that Hobbes is forced to present us with an image of man that does not seem to align with man as we find him. The necessity of equality for Hobbes forces him to deny the differences that we see inherent in man, be they strength, intelligence, or beauty.

Though we find the roots of modern individualism in the egoistic presentation of human nature of Hobbes, this is not where we find its philosophic culmination. Hobbes, though not a proper liberal thinker himself, served as the progenitor for the liberal revolution that would follow him. It is here where the individualistic understanding of man laid out in Hobbes's thought truly comes to prominence. Whereas Hobbes placed absolute power into his sovereign, the reformulation of this state of nature thought in the writing of John Locke brings to the fore the importance not simply of the drives and desires of the individual but also the idea of individual rights. Though premised on the same general framework as Hobbes, the movement into liberalism precipitated by Locke moves the focus away from a view of man as driven to enter political life at all costs to a more measured social contract which is divorced from the manic necessity of Hobbes.

The maturation of Hobbesian individualism into liberal thought brings with it two primary facets which are of interest to a comparative political study of Buddhist thought. These are the idea of consent as necessary to form a legitimate government and the idea of rights, particularly those which are based on the dignity of the individual. The former of these is

interesting because of the overlap found in Buddhist political thought, while the latter is interesting for Buddhist political thought's silence on the matter. While in liberal thought the two concepts are interconnected, the necessity of consent flowing from the inherent rights afforded to every person simply by nature of their existence as an individual, Buddhist thought does not draw a necessary connection between the two. Though the presentation of the origins of political life in the *Aggañña Sutta* speaks of a coming together of persons to form something like a western social contract, the Buddhist texts never give this relationship and the government it creates a special privilege simply because of its foundations in consent. More importantly, the *Aggañña Sutta* demonstrates the insufficiency of this coming together to end the ills of the world. While for Hobbes and Locke the social contract represents a culminating event, allowing man to leave the state of nature for the relative security of political life, Buddhist political thought deflates the value of this transition. The creation of political life is necessary but decidedly not sufficient to cure humanity's ills.

Locke presents a more moderated view of the state and its role in political life compared to that of Hobbes. Where Hobbes called for an all-encompassing state, which was both nearly absolute in its power and incredibly wide in its capacity, Locke understands the state as fundamentally limited in its scope. Beginning with the same understanding of man as an individuated rational being, Locke does not deny any of the first principles presented in Hobbes. In Locke we see both a continuation of the social contract theory and an individualist ontology. Yet for their shared premises, Locke disavows the political conclusions of Hobbes's *Leviathan*. Hobbes places the burden of the social contract on the individuals who came together in creating the sovereign authority to rule over them in the name of protecting peace. It is not a contract of the people *with* a sovereign authority, but a contract of the people with each other to *create* the



sovereign authority.<sup>23</sup> Hobbes's social contract is a coming together of all with all in order to create a political state. Accordingly, any transgression of the sovereign against the people consisting of anything less than returning them to the natural condition of violence does not itself constitute a violation of the social contract, nor does it invalidate its standing. Though he who wields sovereignty may transgress in some way against the people, as Hobbes makes clear in Chapter Eighteen that the sovereign can at least commit iniquity though not injustice, the underlying sovereign authority which is created by the social contract itself is held to no limits as long as its base terms of peace are maintained.<sup>24</sup> The one mandate of man's self-preservation is that he cannot act in such a way that would return him to the condition of violence found in the state of nature. Beyond the bare minimum requirement which serves as the impetus for the creation of the social contract, the removal of man from the state of nature and his subsequent preservation through the creation of a condition of peace, the limits of the sovereign authority are without bound in that man, having found the ability to remove himself from the condition of war through the creation of the sovereign authority, is obligated by the realities of the state of war to never return himself to that condition.<sup>25</sup> Man is duty bound to his own self-preservation, and for this reason sovereign authority can never rightly be dissolved for anything less. Man is so bound to his agreement through the social contract that he is not relieved of it even in the instance that

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., Chapter XVIII, Paragraph 4— "Secondly, because the right of bearing the person of them all is given to him they make sovereign, by covenant only of one to another, and not of him to any of them, there can happen no breach of covenant on the part of the sovereign; and consequently none of his subjects, by any pretense of forfeiture, can be freed from his subjection. That he which is made sovereign maketh no covenant with his subjects before hand is manifest; because either he must make it with the whole multitude, as one party to the covenant, or he must make a several covenant with every man."

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., Chapter XVIII, Paragraph 2.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., Chapter XX, Paragraph 18— "So that it appeareth plainly, to my understanding, both from reason and Scripture, that the sovereign power, whether placed in one man, as in monarchy, or in one assembly of men, as in popular and aristocratical Commonwealths, is as great as possibly men can be imagined to make it. And though of so unlimited a power, men may fancy many evil consequences, yet the consequences of the want of it, which is perpetual war of every man against his neighbor, are much worse."

the sovereign is defeated in war. Here his allegiance must merely switch to the conquering party.<sup>26</sup> His allegiance is not to the sovereign actor, but the sovereign authority which he represents.

Hobbes writes in Chapter Twenty-One of man's other liberties, seemingly trying to emphasize that his leviathan state is not inherently totalitarian. He says of these liberties that "they depend on the silence of the law." In cases "where the sovereign has prescribed no rule, there the subject hath the liberty to do, or forbear, according to his own discretion."<sup>27</sup> He also makes clear that, from a pragmatic perspective, a wise sovereign is likely to recognize the value of allowing as much breadth in these liberties and their exercise as possible. But concerns of pragmatism and discretion are not true protections. Though Hobbes does lay a groundwork for a notion of political rights, this foundation is impossibly thin. It seemingly amounts in the end solely to consist of a right to act consistent with self-preservation, as he makes clear in Chapter Twenty-Six that the sovereign is both not subject to civil law and the sole arbiter of it as he sees fit.<sup>28</sup> Man, through the social contract, is tied to the sovereign authority "as long, and no longer, than the power lasteth by which he is able to protect them," but as long as this standard is met the powers of the sovereign are limited only by his discretion.<sup>29</sup> And given that the failure of a sovereign to meet this requirement is evidence only of a failure by the actor and not of the underlying nature of the contractual agreement, any escape from the sovereign's authority lasts only as long as it takes to immediately reconstitute the commonwealth under a new sovereign

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., Chapter XXI, Paragraph 25.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., Chapter XXI, Paragraph 18.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., Chapter XXVI, Paragraph 6— "The sovereign of a Commonwealth, be it an assembly or one man, is not subject to the civil laws. For having power to make and repeal laws, he may, when he pleaseth, free himself from that subjection by repealing those laws that trouble him, and making of new; and consequently he was free before. For he is free that can be free when he will: nor is it possible for any person to be bound to himself, because he that can bind can release; and therefore he that is bound to himself only is not bound."

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., Chapter XXI, Paragraph 21.

authority. The dissolution of the commonwealth, for whatever reason and as rarely justified as it may be, is never sufficient to justify man's release from the necessity of the social contract and the condition of society it brings.

Locke reshapes this relationship. With Locke we see the rise of the idea of individual rights extending beyond mere self-preservation. This is expressed not only in his assertion that the consent of the governed is necessary to maintain the legitimacy of government but further in his conception of rights as based on man's nature. We can see the origins of this shift in Locke in his formulation of the state of nature. For Hobbes the state of nature was ruled almost solely by violence. Locke paints a different picture, claiming that

The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges every one: and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions... (and) when his own preservation comes not in competition, ought he, as much as he can, to preserve the rest of mankind, and may not, unless it be to do justice on an offender, take away, or impair the life, or what tends to the preservation of the life, the liberty, health, limb, or goods of another.<sup>30</sup>

Here Locke maintains the individualist orientation found in Hobbes, but takes its logic to a new conclusion. Hobbes believed that men were equal by way of their equal ability to kill and to die. We can see clearly here the distinction that Locke makes between the state of nature and the state of war that is absent in Hobbes. For Hobbes, to be in the state of nature means to be in the state of war. For Locke, to be in the state of nature, a condition defined by the right use of reason and the subsequent acknowledgment that "being furnished with like faculties, sharing all in one community of nature, there cannot be supposed any such subordination among us, that

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<sup>30</sup> Locke, John. *The Second Treatise of Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration*. Dover Publications, 2002. Chapter II, Section Six.

may authorize us to destroy one another”<sup>31</sup> means to be in a condition of peace. The state of war, for Locke, is not then a natural condition like it is for Hobbes, but is instead a breakdown or faltering of our natural reasonable condition.

This differentiation made by Locke in the uncoupling of the state of nature and the state of war allows him to create a more robust and nuanced sense of man’s role in political life. Hobbes’s insistence that the state of nature must be escaped permanently at all costs leads him to conclude that there is no meaningful right of rebellion among those who have entered political life.<sup>32</sup> The state of nature is violent, which in turn forces the inhabitants of the state of nature to be brutish. Locke views the state of nature as a far more subdued condition. While he agrees in his conclusion that man is best served by entering into political life, he falls short of painting the state of nature as the hellscape given by Hobbes.<sup>33</sup> This change is reflected in his presentation of man’s nature. No longer is man characterized by violence. Locke paints man, both in the state of nature and out, as governed by reason. While this was true of a sort in Hobbes, it is important to note that the understanding of “reason” presented by each varies greatly. For Hobbes, to be rational meant to be single-mindedly concerned with self-preservation. Locke speaks of reason not as a concern for one’s self, but as an acknowledgement of others. It is reason that teaches us of the inherent equality of each individual, above and beyond Hobbes’s insistence of equality as a function of death and dying, and equally it is this reason which leads us to conclude that government must also respect the dignity inherent in this condition of fundamental equality. Locke’s state, unlike that of Hobbes, is not held to be without bound.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Tralau, Johan. “Hobbes contra Liberty of Conscience.” *Political Theory* 39: 58-84. 2011.

<sup>33</sup> Though in the preceding chapters Locke paints a decidedly rosier picture of the state of nature than does Hobbes, he concludes in Chapter IX that this state soon enough becomes “very unsafe, very insecure.” As with their conclusions on the toleration of religious practice, Locke disagrees with Hobbes on principle but in practice arrives to the same conclusion.

The accounts of proper political life given by Hobbes and Locke vary not as a matter of their means of arriving at a description of man's relationship to political authority, but in their conclusions. They differ not in their approach, but on an answer to a basic question— which is more detrimental to man, to live under tyranny or to live in the state of nature? Hobbes's answer is clear, leaving no justification to return to the condition of total war short of the sovereign's inability to ensure man's preservation, and even then only exceedingly briefly. But Locke, though maintaining Hobbes's general approach, diverges here. His understanding of the individual, defined not by his fear but by a more fully-rounded rationality and the subsequently more placid condition of his state of nature, brings him to conclude that there is more danger to man from a tyrannical civil authority than from his fellow man in a state of nature. Though this condition does, after some time, become "very unsafe, very insecure," it is nonetheless a better condition than that of despotic rule.

We see this reshaped political understanding manifest in Locke in the way he presents the relationship of man in a political condition to the sovereign authority. Gone is the Hobbesian insistence, grounded on his belief in absolute necessity of avoiding a return to the state of nature, that man's connection to the sovereign authority he creates is inviolable. Seeming to respond directly to Hobbes's account of the duty man holds to the sovereign authority in seemingly all instances, Locke makes clear that conditions which warranted a maintenance of sovereign authority for Hobbes, such as "the inroad of foreign force making a conquest upon them," do not warrant it by his account. Instead, where Hobbes would call for a switching of allegiances to the new sovereign authority, Locke releases man to "return to the state he was in before, with a

liberty to shift for himself, and provide for his own safety, as he thinks fit, in some other society.”<sup>34</sup>

This liberal reformulation applies equally to Locke’s understanding of the limits of political authority. Hobbes presents the sovereign as the sole arbiter of the law, the law being whatever the prerogative of the sovereign dictates. Locke, in approaching law, makes clear that civil authority is inherently limited. “Where-ever law ends, tyranny begins,” he writes,

if the law be transgressed to another's harm; and whosoever in authority exceeds the power given him by the law, and makes use of the force he has under his command, to compass that upon the subject, which the law allows not, ceases in that to be a magistrate; and, acting without authority, may be opposed, as any other man, who by force invades the right of another.<sup>35</sup>

Law is a restraint on government, not the sovereign power’s sole directive.

This is further extended through their respective understandings of man’s liberty in relation to the law. Hobbes, though admitting that it is likely a wise and prudent decision on the part of the sovereign to allow as much liberty to his citizens as possible, nonetheless makes clear that the liberty found in the sovereign’s silence can be revoked at any time. Locke too speaks of the liberty found in the law’s silence. He writes,

If a controversy arise betwixt a prince and some of the people, in a matter where the law is silent, or doubtful, and the thing be of great consequence, I should think the proper umpire, in such a case, should be the body of the people: for in cases where the prince hath a trust reposed in him, and is dispensed from the common ordinary rules of the law; there, if any men find themselves aggrieved, and think the prince acts contrary to, or beyond that trust, who so proper to judge as the body of the people, (who, at first, lodged that trust in him) how far they meant it should extend? But if the prince, or whoever they be in the administration, decline that way of determination, the appeal then lies no where but to heaven; force between either persons, who have no known superior

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<sup>34</sup> Locke, John. *The Second Treatise of Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration*. Dover Publications, 2002. Chapter XIX, Section 211.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter XVIII, Section 202.

on earth, or which permits no appeal to a judge on earth, being properly a state of war, wherein the appeal lies only to heaven; and in that state the injured party must judge for himself, when he will think fit to make use of that appeal, and put himself upon it.<sup>36</sup>

Beginning from a position of individual equality, understood not as a function of an equal ability to kill or be killed but of reason, Locke develops his theory of rights. Gone is the Hobbesian notion that the power of the sovereign is absolute without reserve, so long as the sovereign maintains a base condition of peace. There is now a duty of the state to ensure that it does not infringe on the life, liberty, or property of its citizens.<sup>37</sup> This is expressed not solely in the idea of the consent of the governed but also in the separation of the state from the realm of religion and the religious conscience. This duty extends also to the citizens themselves. Because of their natural equality, no citizen is entitled to disparage the rights of another. As a philosophic matter, this logic leads Locke to a defense of religious toleration in the private sphere, and as a matter of practical politics, this logic serves as the basis for modern pluralistic, liberal political life. It is a theory of rights and society which is developed out of Hobbes, an outgrowth of his individualist premises and his understanding of the inalienable right to self-preservation, but

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter XIX, Section 242.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter VII, Section 87—“Man being born, as has been proved, with a title to perfect freedom, and an uncontrouled enjoyment of all the rights and privileges of the law of nature, equally with any other man, or number of men in the world, hath by nature a power, not only to preserve his property, that is, his life, liberty and estate, against the injuries and attempts of other men; but to judge of, and punish the breaches of that law in others, as he is persuaded the offence deserves, even with death itself, in crimes where the heinousness of the fact, in his opinion, requires it. But because no political society can be, nor subsist, without having in itself the power to preserve the property, and in order thereunto, punish the offences of all those of that society; there, and there only is political society, where every one of the members hath quitted this natural power, resigned it up into the hands of the community in all cases that exclude him not from appealing for protection to the law established by it. And thus all private judgment of every particular member being excluded, the community comes to be umpire, by settled standing rules, indifferent, and the same to all parties; and by men having authority from the community, for the execution of those rules, decides all the differences that may happen between any members of that society concerning any matter of right; and punishes those offences which any member hath committed against the society, with such penalties as the law has established...”

which could only become fully actualized with the softened view of human nature found in Locke.

In Hobbes we find the groundwork for a liberal political life, but no true liberalism. In beginning from an understanding of the individual as the primary unit of political analysis and in presenting the foundation for modern political orders in the creation of his wide-reaching state, Hobbes created the necessary philosophic pre-conditions for liberal thought, while not fulfilling the liberal promise himself. Locke does not vary from Hobbes in his understanding of the primary questions which underlie political life, nor in the framework he chooses to view these issues. But on a point which is most fundamental to Hobbes, Locke diverges, failing to view the pre-political condition as so dangerous that man must be willing to accept tyranny in its place. It is here that Locke moves beyond Hobbes and creates the political philosophy necessary for a proper liberal order. When coupled with his full-throated defense of the necessity of religious tolerance in his *Letter Concerning Toleration*, we see, in its most primary form, the promise of modern pluralistic liberal politics. Hobbes and Locke differ, but only programmatically, not at the level of foundations. Hobbes and his state based on the individual give shape to the modern world, while Locke's liberalism provides the content which fills the vessel.

### ***Anatta and the Liberal Self***

The whole of liberal thought is premised on the Western conception on the individual. The justification and construction of the modern state is premised on the social contractarian thought of Hobbes and Locke, understanding the nature of the state as a coming together of individuals and their interests. The matured social contract thought of Locke uses this foundation of the primacy of the individual to ground his presentation of rights as flowing from man's inherent equality. These elements combine to form the contours of liberal thought. The world of



modern politics is an expression of the political and social fruition of these principles.

Contemporary Western political life is designed to not only allow for the full expression of the individual, but through the power of the state to help facilitate the betterment of his condition and being. This idea is expressed in sentiments like the Rawlsian notion of a “life plan,” wherein society is ordered to privilege the individual in his goal of reaching his own desired good.<sup>38</sup>

Liberal thought and society is unintelligible outside of this individualistic context. The primacy of the individual so thoroughly underpins modern liberal society that even thought which favors society or community can only do so within the context of understanding these elements as aggregates of individual wills. It is within this context that contemporary, post-colonial Buddhist societies are slowly attempting to integrate into Western political life. With seemingly no exception, these Buddhist regimes have made clear that they are seeking to reorient and align themselves with the political structures of the West. This is nowhere more evident than the quick abandonment of ancient traditional Buddhist monarchical regimes in favor of states styled on Western principles such as republicanism or constitutionally-limited monarchies. However, as recent political history has demonstrated, this transition cannot be understood simply as a matter of regime reformulation. The ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya Muslim population in Myanmar following the era of supposed political liberalization in the early twenty-first century or the accused violations of rights in the constitutional monarchy of Bhutan give a glimpse to the reality that democratization and movement towards popular sovereignty alone do not equate to the respect of the keystone principles of liberal Western civilization such as individual rights.

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<sup>38</sup> See: Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Belknap Press, 2005 (reissue) and *Political Liberalism*. Columbia University Press, 1993.

One key issue in the difficulty of this transition is the discord created by a lack of philosophic and political conceptualization between the two political cultures. Politics cannot simply be understood in term of regimes. Though the Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia are undoubtedly experiencing movement towards political Westernization, they are doing so without having the intellectual grounding of Western political thought. The adoption of Western political principles by Buddhist countries does not take place in a vacuum. Principles come to be understood within the intellectual and philosophic framework of those who receive them. Lacking a shared philosophic history, there is a natural rupture which takes place in the attempt by Buddhist countries to move into the sphere of western political life. This inherent dissonance was noted as early the 1970s by Buddhist scholar Emanuel Sarkisyanz,

Though democracy and socialism were adapted by Burma from Britain, they were accepted within the context of a Buddhist social ethos... Independence from England increased the dependence of Burma's politicians upon the traditionalist majority for which the unfamiliar abstractions of "democracy" and socialism" could become comprehensible only in the familiar Buddhist context. Thus Buddhism had to leave deep imprints on the absorption of borrowed Western political concepts by the Burmese public.<sup>39</sup>

This tension comes to a head when assessing the standing of the idea of self and the individual within each tradition. There is very little overlap in the presentation of the self in the modern Western tradition and the Buddhist tradition. This divide creates real and substantial problems for even the most good faith efforts to harmonize Buddhist culture and western political life. A regime comprised of people who hold little stock in the philosophical idea of a meaningful "individual" cannot well be expected to then undertake political reforms and action which respects the rights of the individual. Though Buddhist thought clearly does not promote

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<sup>39</sup> Sarkisyanz, Emanuel. "Buddhist Backgrounds of Burmese Socialism". in *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Thailand, Laos, and Burma*. Edited by B. L. Smith. ANIMA Books, 1978.

wild transgressions against the inherent dignity of persons, its justifications for doing so are not rooted in the logical justifications of rights given by the liberal traditions of the West. And as Sarkisyanz notes above, even in instances where attempts are made to directly import these notions, their reception requires an unstated process of adaptation in the course of adoption.

The attempt to unpack the political consequences of the divide created by the Western conception of individuality and the Buddhist principle of *anatta* can only be understood within the context of Buddhist philosophic development. Interestingly, in his wide-reaching history of the development of Buddhist thought Trevor Ling presents Buddhism and the rise of the idea of individuality as not only linked, but further maintains that the very roots of Buddhist thought may themselves be understood as a direct response to the nascent ideas of individuality in the Buddha's own political epoch.

Ling frames his analysis in light of the theory of social development put forward by Emile Durkheim. In attempting to place the origins of the rise of individualism in early Gangetic civilization Ling emphasizes the rapid development of the urban civilization that characterized the period. The importance of this urbanization is that it allows for, and perhaps demands, a separation of man from his natural condition into a condition of specialization. Given that man is no longer forced to be wholly self-sufficient for the sake of survival, he is now free to specialize his skills and create a personality and life that is "something more than a simple incarnation of the generic type of his race and his group."<sup>40</sup>

While this personalization of experience through the rise of individualism sounds much like the stated goals of modern liberalism, for the Buddha it represented a movement away from

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<sup>40</sup> Ling, Pg 61.

the underlying interconnectedness of reality represented by *anatta*. Ling writes unequivocally on this matter,

The transition which many people were then experiencing from the familiar, small-scale society of the old tribal republics to the strange, large-scale and consequently more impersonal, bleaker life of the new monarchical state, was accompanied by a psychological *malaise*, a heightened sense of dissatisfaction with life as it had to be lived. It was this *malaise* which the Buddha was to take as the starting-point of his analysis of the human condition, calling it *dukkha*.<sup>41</sup>

What the liberal understands as the freedom to dictate the contours of one's own life the Buddha understands as the origin of man's suffering. The liberal project then does not simply face difficulty in ingratiating itself into the context of Buddhist society, it may well be firmly antithetical to it as a matter of first principles. In light of Ling's assessment, it should not be surprising that a conflict presents itself when trying to adapt Buddhist practice and culture into a condition defined primarily in light on individualism. Buddhist thought is not simply incompatible with a fully developed notion of individuality, it was designed exactly to be so. As Ling writes, "The private world of the individual, as the 'real' or important world, was denied legitimacy in Buddhist doctrine."<sup>42</sup> The importance of this realization is multiplied by the fact that the intellectual catalyst for this development of an individualistic worldview was driven primarily through the forces of political life. In this regard, if Buddhist thought is to be understood as founded on a rejection of the spiritual malaise created by the rise of individualism and this rise of individualism is itself a product of the expansion and modernization of political life, then it must be considered that Buddhist thought is rightly understood fundamentally as a rejection of this political life as well.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., Pg 62.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., Pg 140.

## Buddhism and Rights

The consequences of this conclusion run deep for the study of Buddhist political development as it seeks to integrate with the West. The most striking political consequence of the Buddhist denial of the Western conception of the individual is the lack of a meaningful conceptions of rights within the context of Buddhist political thought. The problem of rights in relation to Buddhist thought has become particularly evident during the recent period of transition of Buddhist cultures and states into the sphere of Western modernity. Given the particular emphasis placed on the language of rights in the West, contemporary Buddhist political thought has been forced to deal with this issue, usually accomplishing the task by either denying the ultimate importance of rights within the political sphere or more frequently by trying to find a justification for rights language within preexisting Buddhist political thought.

The idea of rights as conceptualized by the West is foreign to Buddhist thought. As Damien Keown notes, there is no word in Pāli or Sanskrit which conveys the Western conception of rights as “subjective entitlement.”<sup>43</sup> Though contemporary Buddhist political discourse does contain some language of rights, as it must to justify and contextualize itself within the framework of modern political life, what is particularly interesting to observe in this discourse is the nearly exclusive framing of rights as “human rights” while ignoring the idea of individual rights which serves as the foundation of liberal thought. Though not widely addressed, this disconnect has been noted by scholars of both the ancient and modern Buddhist traditions. Trevor Ling, examining the role of property in the early years of the Buddhist *sangha*, notes that “some rights, such as the right to life, to free speech, to personal freedom, etc., cluster around the notion of the individual personality.”<sup>44</sup> These issues, he notes, are contradicted by the doctrine of

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<sup>43</sup> Keown, Damien. “Are There ‘Human Rights’ in Buddhism?” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, 2: 3-27, 1995. Pg 11.

<sup>44</sup> Ling, Pg 126.

*anatta* which is incompatible with the understanding of the individual which necessarily underlies them and is thus rendered unintelligible from within a purely Buddhist context.

Contemporary Buddhist political writings also acknowledge the issues which arise from the Western conceptualization and primacy of the individual as it relates to the foundations of political life. A passage from French philosopher and Buddhist scholar Fabrice Midal typifies the contemporary Buddhist stance on the standing of the individual in modernity. Writing here on the thought of twenty-first century Buddhist thinkers and founder of the modern Shambhalan movement Chogyam Trungpa, Midal writes,

One of the characteristics of the modern world is that it reinforces individualism. After a few years in the West, [Trungpa] realized that this obsessive individualism, based on the cult of each person's subjectivity, was contributing to a climate of distress and alienation that made it much more difficult to establish a true society.

How can we really live together if we are constantly driven by competition as a way of affirming ourselves? The basic relaxation that we can experience in meditation practice transforms this struggle for independence. We can stop struggling to affirm subjectivity and begin to trust in the basic nature of what is. This is not a matter of giving up our freedom, but rather of accepting it.

It is on this basis that a genuine society can be established.<sup>45</sup>

This passage cuts to the core of the contemporary Buddhist political critique of modern Western political life. Whereas liberal thought places the role of individualism at the core of its theory, allowing it to serve as the intellectual basis for rights and liberties, Buddhist political thought understands the Western obsession with the individual as a misguided fixation which obscures its vision of a true politics. To premise political life on the individual is to poison the project of politics from the beginning, rendering political life incapable of orientating itself towards the

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<sup>45</sup> Midal, Fabrice. "Creating Enlightened Society: The Shambhala Teachings of Chogyam Trungpa." in *Mindful Politics*. Edited by Melvin McLeod. Wisdom Publications, 2006. Pgs 96-97.

goal of diffusing individual interests in light of the collectivizing goals of societal enlightenment. As emphasized by Midal, contemporary Buddhist thought questions the importance of freedom and rights as understood by the modern liberal tradition. Conjuring up images of Rousseau, Buddhist thought understands these “freedoms” as the force which ultimately suppresses man’s ability to achieve true freedom through enlightenment.

Seemingly in acknowledgment that any political discourse which is to be taken seriously in modernity must account for the idea of rights, some work has been undertaken by contemporary Buddhist thinkers to find a basis for rights within Buddhist political thought. Interestingly, given the fact that Buddhist thought is incompatible with the idea of individualism used to ground the understanding of rights in the modern liberal tradition, Buddhist scholars have been forced to attempt to find new grounds on which to found their presentations of rights. The most serious of these attempts, such as the work of Damien Keown, seek to reorient the foundations of Western rights in line with the Buddhist conception of duties. Though Keown admits that the language of rights is not found within traditional Buddhist thought, he denies that this means that they cannot be found there. To do so he employs an argument similar to that of Justice William Douglas in the United States Supreme Court decision of *Griswold v Connecticut*<sup>46</sup>, arguing that “the concept of a right may exist where a word for it does not.”<sup>47</sup> Using this penumbral logic, Keown examines the requirements placed on man’s action in light of the demands of *dhamma*. Though Buddhist thought may not speak to that which man is entitled to, be they rights or liberties, it does place constraint on proper human actions. Through the examination of the negative space of these demands, we can infer the subsequent “rights” which are afforded through these actions to others. As Keown explains,

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<sup>46</sup> *Griswold v. Connecticut*. 381 US 479 (1965).

<sup>47</sup> Keown (1995), Pg 11.

From this it would seem that Dharma determines not just “what one is due to do” but also “what is due to one.” Thus through A’s performance of his Dharmic duty B receives that which is his “due” or, we might say, that to which he is “entitled” in (under, through) Dharma. Since Dharma determines the duties of husbands and the duties of wives, it follows that the duties of one correspond to the entitlements or “rights” of the other. If the husband has a duty to support his wife, the wife has a “right” to support from her husband. If the wife has a duty to look after her husband’s property, the husband has a “right” to the safe-keeping of his property by his wife.<sup>48</sup>

Rights then, though not explicitly stated, are necessarily implied.<sup>49</sup>

This logic also expands beyond the realm of the personal, providing some basis for the protection of rights at the institutional level. Keown writes, “If under Dharma it is the duty of a king (or political authority) to dispense justice impartially, then subjects (citizens) may be said to have a ‘right’ to just and impartial treatment before the law.”<sup>50</sup> This idea has particular relevance in relation to the political thought of the early Buddhist texts. The *Dasavidha-rājadhamma*, cited through the Pāli texts, lays out the ten particular duties of a Buddhist king. Among these are the idea that the king is required to provide for the public interest, that he must be honest, that he must practice non-violence whenever possible, and that he must act in such a way as avoid prejudicial behavior towards his subjects. When viewed in light of Keown’s correlate theory of Buddhist rights, a reasonably robust presentation emerges. Just from these principles, a Buddhist could rightly expect a basic social safety net, protections from state coercion, and the right to an impartial justice system. This conceptualization of a Buddhist state based in rights has seen some application in practical politics by Burmese monk and political activist Rewata Dhamma, who in

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., Pg 12.

<sup>49</sup> The basic contours of this argument are echoed in the Western tradition by the discussion on the origins of the language of rights by Brian Tierney in *The Idea of Natural Rights*. Here, in an attempt to intellectually recover the Western tradition of natural law, Tierney appeals to ancient and medieval understandings of duties as a foundation for rights as preceding more modern conceptions of individual, natural rights as we see in Locke.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.



the 1980s used a similar approach in criticizing the totalitarian Burmese government, citing the traditional Buddhist duties of the king as a tool in seeking to “emphasize duties or responsibilities rather than codified rights set out in international or domestic law” as a means gain protections for Burmese citizens against their government.<sup>51</sup>

In contemporary Buddhist political discourse, particularly that of the Engaged Buddhism movement, discussion of the foundation of rights within Buddhist thought has moved away from the idea of duties presented in the traditional Buddhist texts in favor of basing rights on the idea of Buddhist compassion, a notion generally found in short supply in the political thought of Western modernity.<sup>52</sup> The political principles preached by the Engaged Buddhist movement, the most prominent Buddhist political movement since the mid-twentieth century, look a lot like modern liberal progressivism. We see concern for social justice, anti-neoliberal globalism, and environmentalism. In this regard, the concerns of engaged Buddhism are in many ways already aligned with that of Western politics.

The importance of compassion is well grounded in Buddhist thought, particularly that of the Mahāyāna tradition (which includes both the Tibetan and Zen schools of Buddhist thought). The contemporary Buddhist understanding of compassion is rooted in the traditional idea of *karuṇā* (compassion). Alan Watts, writing from the context of the Zen tradition, makes clear that *karuṇā* is not an element which exists as an abstracted principle. The discovery and embrace of *karuṇā* arises in the Buddhist practitioner as a function of the fruition of Buddhist practice itself. He writes, “For this is simply the basic Mahāyāna principle that *prajñā* [wisdom] leads to *karuṇā*

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<sup>51</sup> Rewata Dhamma. “Buddhism, Human Rights, and Justice in Burma.” Speech delivered at the Church Center for the UN, New York, November 1989. [http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs08/Rewata\\_Dhamma-Buddhism\\_Human\\_Rights\\_and\\_Justice\\_in\\_Burma.pdf](http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs08/Rewata_Dhamma-Buddhism_Human_Rights_and_Justice_in_Burma.pdf). Web.

<sup>52</sup> Prebish, Charles and Damien Keown. *Buddhism- The Ebook*. Journal of Buddhist Ethics Online Books, 2006. Pg 323-324.

[compassion], that awakening is not truly attained unless it also implies the life of the Bodhisattva [a teacher who has reached enlightenment but abstains from the release from *samsāra* in order to help others achieve the same].”<sup>53</sup> In this understanding, an acceptance of compassion is that which arises from the attainment of wisdom. Further, in invoking the idea of the *Bodhisattva*, Watts implies that one who has achieved this wisdom necessarily discovers the necessity of compassion as a principle which underlies this newly discovered moral universe. Though enlightenment is a process which predates the realization of the necessity of compassion, upon gaining this wisdom the importance of compassion becomes apparent. Contemporary Zen commentator and proponent of socially-engaged Buddhism David Brazier takes this thought to its logical conclusion. On the nature of compassion, he says the following, “Compassion power is, therefore, the highest value in Buddhism. Compassion means concern about the afflictions suffered by others. Compassion needs wisdom in order to be effective. Compassion is highest, however. Wisdom is the servant of compassion.”<sup>54</sup>

Contemporary Buddhist political thought embraces this notion of compassion as a guide to ethical and political action.<sup>55</sup> Not simply serving as a guide for how action should proceed, socially engaged Buddhist thought takes compassion as an impetus to action itself, seeking to counteract the perceptions of Buddhism as merely intellectual and quietist. As described by Stephen Batchelor, “While some maintain that this [the fact that humans are fundamentally driven by craving] is simply the nature of the world, others insist that compassion demands that

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<sup>53</sup> Watts, Pg 166.

<sup>54</sup> Brazier, David. *The New Buddhism*. St. Martin's Griffin, 2002. Pgs 24-25.

<sup>55</sup> This notion is not entirely without precedent in Western presentations of ethics. The practice of Ethics of Care developed by Carol Gilligan (1982) indicts Western thought for a preoccupation with abstract notions of justice. In place of these abstractions, Gilligan suggests an ethics based on the principles of empathy and compassion, maintaining that these ethical dilemmas can be resolved through an examination of human interdependency. Seyla Benhabib (1985), who examines care ethics as a function of political theory, finds it to be in direct opposition to the ego-driven theories (such as that of Hobbes and Locke) which undergird the political thought of Western modernity.

one tackle the root societal causes of this collective suffering. At this point engagement goes beyond mere reform and advocates radical social and political change.”<sup>56</sup> Using this logic leads authors such as Noah Levine to declare that “Buddhist practice is a political action.”<sup>57</sup>

While the contemporary politics built on the Buddhist idea of compassion are in many ways aligned with the contemporary politics of modern West, explicitly calling for political action which is in line with modern progressive political values, there is an important distinction which must be noted. Though left unstated by engaged Buddhist thought, there is a marked preference in the politics built on Buddhist compassion to privilege the importance of human rights at the expense of traditional, liberal-minded individual rights. This preference for discussions of human rights over individual rights should not be understood as simply a choice by contemporary Buddhist political thinkers, but instead as a necessary consequence of the nature of the Buddhist presentation of compassion. By its nature, the Buddhist discussion of compassion is intended to accentuate the interconnectedness of being. This is typically understood as a means to counteract that atomizing principles of some facets of Buddhist thought. Compassion is the means through which Buddhist thought allows, if not demands according to some traditions, practitioners to put the principles of Buddhist thought into action towards the betterment of society. Accordingly, a preference is baked into the Buddhist idea of compassion which favors the social over the individual. The consequence of this within contemporary Buddhist political thought, which premises itself on compassion, has been an intellectual disregard for the idea of individualized rights. This is not to say that political thought built on Buddhist compassion has spoken out against the idea of individual rights, simply that the

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<sup>56</sup> Batchelor, Stephen. *The Awakening of the West: The Encounter of Buddhism and Western Culture*. Parallax Press, 1994. Pg 365.

<sup>57</sup> Levine, Noah. “Practice is Politics.” in *Mindful Politics*. Edited by Melvin McLeod. Wisdom Publications, 2006. Pg 109.

idea is nearly ignored entirely. This strain of thought does not directly degrade that of Locke and Jefferson, it just ignores it in favor of justification of rights built on the thought of the Buddha.

The effect of this new Buddhist politics is a double-edged sword as it relates to the attempt to transition Buddhist countries into modern Western states. In one regard, the conceptual availability and political acceptance of the idea of broadly understood human rights brought about by the politicization of Buddhist compassion allows for some meaningful common ground for this process to take place. Though this presentation may not be as robust as the theory of rights formed in the Western liberal tradition, it nonetheless provides a solid shared conceptualization and a base upon which to establish a political order which can be aligned with these principles. However, this assertion runs the risk of making the congruity of the situation appear far too seamless. Though the attempt to harness compassion as a political tool is laudable, it encounters the issue of attempting to universalize a principle which only retains its meaning in its original context. Compassion as a tool to facilitate proper relations among Buddhist practitioners has proven, both historically and contemporaneously, to be a valuable asset. However, it must be understood that this principle is only useful and intelligible from within the framework of Buddhist thought. It is only as compelling to a political actor as that actor is Buddhist. In this regard, though the proponents of engaged Buddhism may argue that they have successfully found a principle for political action from within the Buddha's thought, in reality they have not succeeded in truly making Buddhism political as much as they have just colored it with Western language. The human rights proposed by Buddhist compassion politics are not founded on abstract and universal principles, they are founded on explicitly Buddhist principles. While this may be useful as a means to compel personal, private action, it is not sufficient to found a political order and particularly so a liberal Westernized state. A state built upon this

principle could be understood only as theocratic, albeit a theocracy far more subdued than many we have seen prior. Buddhist compassion is not a political principle, it is a religious principle. To found a regime on this basis would be no more viable than founding one upon the golden rule. And it would be not less theocratic at its core than founding one upon the religious assumptions of any other tradition either. Though it may understand itself as an attempt to bring Buddhist political thought in line with the political thought of the West, the principles of a socially engaged and politically active Buddhism built on the idea of Buddhist compassion succeed only within a context where the scope of appropriate human action is limited to that which is befitting of the *dhamma*.

Both the methods of focusing on duties and on compassion as a foundation for rights are attempts within Buddhist political thought to bring itself in line with the necessary language and conceptualizations of modern, liberal thought. This in itself is both a laudable project and one that is likely necessary if the goal is to align traditionally Buddhist societies and government with the political structures of the modern West. We need look no further than the issues within Myanmar between the state's various ethnic identities to realize that some common language of rights is necessary if a state like Myanmar wishes to bring itself within the political sphere of the Western world. Yet though the formulations of rights as originating from duties and compassion are undoubtedly meaningful steps in the right direction, from the perspective of political theory it is less clear that these projects will ultimately be useful in bridging the cultural and political divide that presents itself around the idea of the individual.

The respective Buddhist projects regarding rights suffer within the context of the project to create a shared foundation with Western thought for the same reason that they are so successful in finding an understanding of rights within Buddhist thought. These rights projects

ultimately fail as a means to bridge the philosophic divide between Buddhist thought and liberal thought because they are first and foremost Buddhist, and can only be understood within this context. Though they succeed in creating a shared linguistic and conceptual base, a theory of rights based on Buddhist duties or Buddhist compassion is only meaningful and compelling insofar as the subject at hand is *Buddhist*. Peter Junger, keenly aware of this problem due to his dual standing as both a Buddhist and an American legal scholar, succinctly summarizes the issue: "...though followers of Buddhist traditions do value most, if not all, of the interests underlying the rhetoric of human rights, they may not have much use for the label itself, which is, after all, a product of the traditions of Western Europe and the parochial histories of that region."<sup>58</sup> These Buddhist theories of rights undoubtedly provide an ethical directive that is comparable in scope and form to the theories of rights in the Western tradition, but their claims are only compelling to those who take the premises of Buddhist thought seriously. Whereas a Jeffersonian theory of natural rights seeks to ground itself on an abstraction of man and his nature regardless of religious claims, the Buddhist theories of rights are only intelligible insofar as one accepts the truth of the greater Buddhist claims. Outside of the bounds of Buddhist conceptions like *dhamma* and *kamma*, there is no abstract foundation for the Buddhist principle of compassion nor the Buddhist requirement that a king practice non-violence.

This disconnect points to the core problem underlying any attempt to bring together the political practices and communities of the West and traditionally Buddhist countries. The creation of a shared language of philosophic concepts is a necessary process, but the exact circumstances of the project are very particular. To describe it simply as creating a shared vernacular is somewhat misleading. The projects of Damien Keown and contemporary engaged

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<sup>58</sup> Junger, Peter. "Why the Buddha Has No Rights." in *Buddhism and Human Rights*. Edited by Damien Keown et al. Routledge, 1997. Pg 55.

Buddhism demonstrate that it is possible to conjure some sort of a theory of rights from within Buddhist thought. They are able to create a shared language between the traditions. What these projects do not accomplish however is ensuring that the shared language they have created is made up of pieces which are interchangeable with those of the Western tradition. Trying to justify a social safety net to a Protestant American on the basis of the *Dasavidha-rājadhamma* will be no more successful than a Western attempt at bringing an end to the ethnic cleansing in Myanmar on the basis of Lockean principles. Even if we are able to create a shared conceptual language, it cannot simply be assumed to be the case that we are speaking in the same terms. These philosophic conceptions must be grounded on the same philosophic principles. Otherwise we have only managed to create a condition where two traditions are capable of speaking past one another without realizing the fundamental disconnect that underlies their conversation. In this regard, the project of attempting to lessen the differences between the two presentations of political life succeeds only in muddying the waters of discourse. The modern Buddhist project of attempting to justify a Western conception of rights outside of the Western understanding of the individual is an example of an instance where we may be better off simply acknowledging difference than forcing ourselves to believe we have found a shared grounding.

### **Political Life and Death**

The issues created from the respective understandings of self in the liberal and Buddhist traditions are further drawn out by contrasting the role of death in each tradition. Though infrequently deliberated in common political discourse in proportion to its obviously ubiquitous role in human existence, death serves a foundational role in the thought which underlies the modern Western political condition. It finds its greatest proponent in the thought of Thomas Hobbes, who promotes death as the catalyst which drives the creation of political life. He holds it

as the highest rational concern of man's reason-driven nature. Yet though Hobbes holds death as the impetus of political life, he is not the first to note the essential relationship between death and political life. From its beginnings (perhaps quite literally by way of the death of Socrates), the Western tradition has maintained that politics and death are intertwined.

### **The Buddhist Understanding of Death**

“From death lead me to deathlessness.”<sup>59</sup> This line from the *Upanishads*, an ancient Hindu text which is shared in part by the Buddhist tradition, succinctly summarizes the vision of death which underlies the Buddhist project<sup>60</sup> In contrast to the Christian soteriological venture of finding ever-lasting life, Buddhist salvation (insofar as the term is applicable) presents itself in a directly opposite fashion, seeking instead to escape the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (*samsāra*) itself. While *nibbana* is occasionally spoken of in the West as essentially akin to the Christian concept of heaven and containing something like the soteriological element of Christianity, the enlightenment spoken of here is radically different than anything found within the Christian tradition. The term itself translates to “blown out,” as with a flame, calling to mind the extinguishing of the fire of existence and the stillness of being which comes with it.<sup>61</sup> In this regard, Buddhism is the spiritual opposite of both Christian thought and the greater Western philosophic tradition. While these two traditions seek to heighten awareness of existence, either through a greater connection with God or through the philosophic act respectively, Buddhism seeks to escape the trap of existence entirely. Buddhism clearly shares more in common with the

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<sup>59</sup> Burt, Edwin A. *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha*. Mentor, 1982. Pg 16.

<sup>60</sup> The relationship between early Buddhist and Hindu thought is complicated. Even to speak of a wholesale, systematic “Hindu” thought is misleading and anachronistic for the era. While the thought of the Buddha was a response to and can only be made intelligible in light of the Brahmanical thought of his age, Walshe (1995, pg 24) warns against the notion that the Buddha was simply “a ‘Hindu who sought to reform the ancient religion.’” Nonetheless, in his presentation of death the Buddha maintained the idea of death as a part of a larger cycle of existence that was present in pre-Buddhist Indian thought.

<sup>61</sup> Siderits, Mark. *Buddhism as Philosophy: An Introduction*. Ashgate, 2007. Pg 27.



distrust of the world present in the Book of Ecclesiastes than the condition of God seeing his creation and declaring it good which permeates the majority of the Biblical canon.

Though particularities differ throughout the various cultures and sects of Buddhist practice, there are several broad observations which can be made about the underlying tenets of the Buddhist understanding of death. First, as opposed to its Western conception, death in the Buddhist view lacks finality. Death signals the end of one temporal segment, but it does not signal the end of the larger goal of release from the cyclical wheel of existence itself. This sort of release is only achievable when one attains enlightenment. Shy of meeting this goal, this process is begun anew by way of a rebirth, the conditions of which are either improved or degraded based on one's past actions. This causal law, known as *kamma*, is not based necessarily on the moral or ethical standing of one's past actions, but on the progress made towards enlightenment as judged in relation to living in line with *dhamma*. In either regard, death is not an existential end, but rather more akin to the end of a chapter in a book which is constantly being written. More importantly, death is not an evil which is to be avoided as we see with Hobbes and the greater Western tradition, but simply a reality of existence.

This deprioritization of temporality allows the Buddhist a fresh view on the nature of death. Birth, life, and death are all neutral in value, in and of themselves. Much like the Buddhist view of reason, they are merely instrumental, not ends themselves, way-stops in a far larger and more important project. In this regard, Buddhism seems to mirror Socrates, who in the *Phaedo* argues that bodily existence can be an impediment to the achievement of truth and philosophic wisdom. This notion is mirrored almost exactly in the Buddhist conception of wisdom. Existence is suffering, and this is the case because existence is characterized by want and attachment. This refers not merely to want of extravagance. The human need for food is as

much a want as the desire for luxury. Yet the former is wholly inescapable within the confines of corporeal existence. Both Socrates and the Buddha place this reality as an impediment in the quest of the achievement of truth.

Death within the Buddhist tradition can only be understood within the context of the Buddhist presentation of the self and the ego. It is constantly forced to balance a tension between understandings of traditional material death and of the ego-death of the self that takes places in meditative practices, culminating in the release from *samsāra*. This is primarily a tension between theory and practice. Though Buddhist practitioners do not seek nor welcome death to a greater degree than practitioners of any other tradition, there is a perception that Buddhist thought offers greater guidance on the matter and that the tools acquired through Buddhist practice allow one to “do death better.”<sup>62</sup> The deprioritization of the both the material and the temporal are the driving factors of this process. Contrary to the presentation of death in many other cultures, Buddhist practice embraces the notion that death should be examined and contemplated. Monks in countries such as Vietnam “meditate on decaying corpses as a way to understand impermanence and free themselves from sensual attachments.”<sup>63</sup> Though the death of the body is in no way equivalent to the release found in the death of the ego, contemplating on the former allows us some tangible means to contextualize and understand the ultimate impermanence of being that is nearly inconceivable from within our necessarily material frame of reference.

The Buddhist understanding of material death is intrinsically linked to the process of rebirth. As a matter of Buddhist practice, this is reflected in the traditional funeral rites which

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<sup>62</sup> Garces-Foley, Kathleen. “Buddhism, Hospice, and the American Way of Dying.” *Review of Religious Research* 14: 341-353. 2003.

<sup>63</sup> Truitner, Ken and Nga Truitner. “Death and Dying in Buddhism.” in *Ethnic Variations in Dying, Death, and Grief*. Edited by Donald Irish, Kathleen Lundquist, and Vivian Jenkins Nelson. Routledge, 1993. Pg 129.

span a length of 49 to 100 days, accounting for the time necessary for the deceased to transition through the stages of death and rebirth.<sup>64</sup> As a matter of Buddhist thought, the effects of the interconnectedness between death and rebirth serves to negate the effects of temporality on man's understanding of himself and his place within the universe.<sup>65</sup> Man's existence within the wheel of *samsāra*, coupled with the maintenance of the laws of causality through existence of *kamma*, serve to undercut the finality of death as a matter of temporal existence. Death is only one part of the perpetual system of becoming.

### **The Problem of Death in Western Political Thought**

Socrates claims in the *Phaedo* that “those who philosophize rightly make dying their care.”<sup>66</sup> The act of philosophy is learning how to die. Socrates thus inexorably ties together wisdom and death. Philosophy is the highest end, yet the highest end of life points beyond life itself. But it is important to note how exactly Socrates characterizes death in the *Phaedo*. He presents death as a good, but not a good for its own sake. Rather death is an instrumental good. Death is good because it represents a release from the temporal. With the coming of death, the philosopher is released from the enslavement of temporality and corporality.

This is a decidedly different presentation of death than we see in Hobbes. With Hobbes, death is an evil because it represents a complete finality. The presentation of death by Socrates in the *Phaedo* differs in a fundamental way. While death clearly represents an end to temporal existence, Socrates does not seem to paint it with the air of complete finality which Hobbes does.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., Pgs 130-131.

<sup>65</sup> Kalupahana, David. “The Buddhist Conception of Time and Temporality.” *Philosophy East and West* 24: 181-191. 1974.

<sup>66</sup> Plato. *Plato's Phaedo*. Trans. Eva T. H. Brann, Peter Kalkavage, and Eric Salem. Focus Publishing, 1998. 67e.

Rather the Socratic presentation of death in the *Phaedo* more closely mirrors that of the Buddhist than that of modern political philosophy.

Socrates' account of death in the *Phaedo* in many ways appears to be a presentation of the Buddhist conception of existential liberation, only done in the language of Western philosophy. Philosophy is not dying, it is *learning* to die. Accordingly, wisdom isn't found in death itself, but in the realization of the true nature of death. Wisdom is not what you find outside of the Platonic cave. Wisdom is the ability to be released from the chains which held you in the cave to begin with. Equally, death is not a liberation. Liberation is found in *understanding* death. Socrates' teachings make no offer of escaping death, but in the perfection of the soul through philosophy we find something that approaches deathlessness in its own right.

Though the Myth of Er, which concludes Book X of Plato's *Republic*, is insufficient evidence to support the idea that Socrates or Plato maintained a belief in rebirth and the perpetual, cyclical understanding of death found in the Buddhist tradition, Plato's Socrates comes about as close to expressing the Buddhist understanding of enlightenment and liberation as is possible without holding this belief in *samsāra*.<sup>67</sup> The liberation of the philosopher from the cave and the liberation of the spirit from the cycle of existence both present an understanding of man as imprisoned by forces outside of his control. And if we take the release of the Socratic man in the cave from his chains as being brought about by the achievement of wisdom, the processes of liberation for both the Buddha and Socrates begin to align in fascinating ways. For Socrates, wisdom is achieved in the process of learning how to die. This is not a process of merely accepting death, but instead of understanding the nature and value of death. The release

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<sup>67</sup> Timothy Lomperis, though he must ultimately conclude that any evidence for intellectual interaction is sparse and circumstantial, adequately demonstrates that the Greeks of Plato's era had interaction with Hindu thinkers who may have held similar beliefs. *Hindu Influence on Greek Philosophy*. Minerva, 1984.

of death brings with it a release from the body, and thus a release from the passions.<sup>68</sup> It is only with this release that the philosopher can achieve the height of his existence, completely unencumbered by burdens placed on him by both his temporal body and society. This is almost exactly the goal of the Buddhist in the process of achieving enlightenment. Their projects are not identical, but they are strikingly similar. Socrates teaches that man's highest end is learning to die. The Buddha seeks to teach how to embrace death in order to escape it entirely.

As it regards both the highest end of man and how to achieve it, Socrates and the Buddha share a great similarity for two thinkers who are believed to never have interacted intellectually. Yet there is one key distinction which must be made. The above discussion of Socrates understands him solely as philosopher. Death is perhaps the most atomizing of all experiences, and in this regard when Socrates speaks of death he is speaking solely of the philosopher and of philosophy in an individualized vacuum. But this wholly ignores the context of the greater Socratic project. Socrates was not merely a philosopher, but first and foremost a *political* philosopher. Detached from the rest of the dialogue and from the Socratic canon generally, the discussion of death in the *Phaedo* presents an idealized understanding of the philosophic project. In speaking of death and its relationship to philosophy, Socrates presents a picture of perfect philosophy, existing apart from the realities of existence and society. He presents philosophy as he as a philosopher wishes it could be and understands that it would be were only the philosopher able to escape the realities of society. And in this presentation, of philosophy as existing outside of the confines and concerns of mundane reality and the requirements of political life, Socrates presents an understanding of philosophy which aligns to a great degree with Buddhist thought.

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<sup>68</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, 66a-67e.

Yet even in this dialogue where Socrates presents this pure picture of philosophy, Socrates is forced to reckon with the reality that the philosopher does not exist in the atomized state that death allows. The philosopher exists within society, and in this regard as its greatest member, the philosopher must comport himself with a certain sense of duty to society. Even in his discussion of death Socrates finds himself in a political situation. Despite his claim that one should die in silence, this is not possible, as Socrates' interactions with his interlocutors in the text make clear.<sup>69</sup> Even death, the most solitary of all human experiences, is in its own right political. As long as the philosopher is within the city he cannot act apolitically, not even in dying.

The *Phaedo* is a work which is meant to be, and in some respects can only be, viewed in light of the *Apology of Socrates*. While this is true to a large degree in all of the Platonic works which outline the Socratic quest, the content of the *Phaedo* mirrors that of the *Apology* to a greater extent. The trial of Socrates finds its ultimate culmination in the *Phaedo*. The Socratic mission as expressed in the *Apology* is to bring reason to the city at the behest of the gods. This seems most clearly also to be the project of the *Phaedo*. Socrates is once again called upon a divine mission, this time to write poetry.<sup>70</sup> And once again upon testing this mission, he finds it to be inferior. The philosopher cannot divorce himself from political life, even in his time of dying. Socrates must continue to bring reasonableness to the unreasonable. In the *Phaedo*, this can only be accomplished by veiling his reason in the unreasonable, crafting myths for the

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<sup>69</sup> See 117c, "In spite of myself, my own tears poured forth in torrents, so that I hid my face and bewailed my loss... But Apollodorus, who hadn't stopped weeping even during the whole time before, at that moment really let loose with such a storm of wailing and fussing that there wasn't a single one of those present whom he didn't break up—except, of course, Socrates himself.

And that man said, "What are you doing, you wonders! Surely this wasn't the least of my reason for sending the women away— so they wouldn't strike such false notes!..."

<sup>70</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, 60a-61c.

benefit of his friends and presenting multiple, unconnected pictures of death which appear to serve no other purpose than to quell their fears.<sup>71</sup> Socrates in the *Phaedo* is put with the task of speaking reasonably to unreasonable people. In this respect, the *Phaedo* is a political work, as Socrates' last act is to create a noble lie.<sup>72</sup>

Given his presentation of perfect philosophic practice when unencumbered by the necessities of temporal existence and society in the *Phaedo*, it does not seem too far of a stretch to say that Socrates could be quite comfortable as a Buddhist. His understanding of the atomized philosopher mirrors quite closely the Buddhist project of release from *samsāra*. But Socrates as he was could never accept this proposition. Socrates could never accept the Buddhist project in its entirety because of the duty he maintained that the philosopher held towards society.<sup>73</sup> No philosopher is just a philosopher in the Socratic conception. All philosophy must be preceded by political philosophy, and accordingly every philosopher must also be a political philosopher. The Buddhist deprioritization of the temporal and political might appeal to Plato's Socrates on a

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<sup>71</sup> Throughout the *Phaedo*, Socrates presents a number of different arguments for the immortality of the soul. These include the argument that the soul must be immortal because we seem to possess some knowledge from the time of our birth (72e-73a), that the soul is immortal because of its incorporeal nature (81b), and that the soul is immortal as a function of its participation in the Form of Life, much in the way numerical value is immortal because of its participation in the Form of Evenness or Oddness (100c-104c). This disjointed and scattershot approach, reaching for any way to bring his interlocutors some acceptance of his fate, stands in stark contrast to the behavior of Socrates himself throughout the *Phaedo*, seemingly in peaceful acceptance. The discussion is clearly held for their benefit, as Socrates claims at the dialogue's opening (60e-61a) that he has, at the order of a dream, chosen to set aside philosophy at the time of his death in favor of making music and poetry. If we are to take this declaration seriously, we must conclude that the philosophizing that takes place throughout the *Phaedo* is done not for Socrates' benefit but for the benefit of his friends. Or perhaps that what we are seeing is not philosophizing at all, but the creation of poetry and myth.

<sup>72</sup> See: Ahrens Dorf, Peter J. *The Death of Socrates and the Life of Philosophy: An Interpretation of Plato's Phaedo*. State University of New York, 1995.; Dorter, Kenneth. *Plato's Phaedo: An Interpretation*. University of Toronto, 1982.; "Introduction" in *Plato's Phaedo*. Trans. Eva T. H. Brann, Peter Kalkavage, and Eric Salem. Focus Publishing/R. Pullins, 1998.; Stern, Paul. *Socratic Rationalism and Political Philosophy: An Interpretation of Plato's Phaedo*. State University of New York, 1993.

<sup>73</sup> There is an interesting analogue to this understanding in the Buddhist tradition, though again it is in relation to enlightenment and decidedly apolitical. The concept of the *bodhisattva*, emphasized particularly within the Mahāyāna tradition of Buddhism, describes a person who is capable of reaching enlightenment, thus releasing themselves from the wheel of *samsāra*, but delays doing so in order to remain within temporal existence as a teacher to aid in the enlightenment of others.

personal, selfish level, but his larger canon makes clear that he could never accept it in practice. Much as the Socratic philosopher can never be king, he can equally never be a Buddhist. And for the same reasons.

### **Death as a Political Problem in Modernity**

Death to Socrates in the *Phaedo* was a matter of wisdom. To Thomas Hobbes, death is a matter of rational calculation. Hobbes positions death as the foundation for political life in his *Leviathan*. Its psychological power over man is so great that it is from our fear of violent death that we agree to enter into the social contract, thus leaving behind the state of nature and entering into the political world. Death so thoroughly consumes the mind of man in Hobbes's psychology that its possibility serves to create political life itself. On a superficial level, Hobbes and Buddhist political thought appear to agree here. Both maintain that political life is merely instrumental to further a greater end. For the Buddhist, this end is the achievement of enlightenment. For Hobbes, it is the most prudent way to avoid the possibility of violent death.

But death is not an evil to the Buddhist the way it is to Hobbes. On the contrary, life may well be more harmful than death. While both view political life as instrumental, their desired ends are fully at cross purposes. Fear of violent death is the actualization of an attachment. The Hobbesian insistence of avoiding death at all costs is evidence to the Buddhist of an attachment which is not fruitful for the process of liberation. In fact, fear itself is specifically presented in the Pāli texts as obstacle in the achievement of enlightenment.<sup>74</sup> Insofar as Hobbes regards political life as in service to this end, the Buddhist must only conclude that the modern

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<sup>74</sup> Giustarini, Giuliano. "The Role of Fear (Bhaya) in the Nikayas and in the Abhidhamma." *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 40: 511-531. 2012.



conception of political life, and the Western insistence of its primacy in the scope of man's being, is itself corrupting towards achieving the goals of the Buddhist project.

The origins of this disconnect are found at the very opening of Hobbes's work. In the introduction to the *Leviathan*, Hobbes presents an understanding of reality as strictly corporeal and mechanical. In this rejection of traditional metaphysics at the expense of the material, Hobbes is at odds with both ancient political thought and Buddhist thought. His presentation throughout the opening chapters of the work of sense as the foundation of knowledge exacerbates this divide.<sup>75</sup> Given that Hobbes founds both his ontology and epistemology on this premise of materialism, his philosophy is fundamentally unable to speak to that of Buddhist thought in any meaningful way. In an understanding of the world which is wholly materialistic, the fear of violent death makes an extremely compelling case to serve as the foundation of political life. But for Buddhist thought, which explicitly promotes an understanding of reality which goes beyond, and mostly negates, the material and temporal, this Hobbesian understanding is both insufficient and ultimately damaging towards the cause of enlightenment. While both agree on the instrumentality of politics and reason, this ontological divide proves a gap too far to bridge.

The issue of death as a political concern in the relationship between Buddhist political thought and the modern state arises not simply because of the preeminence of death as the justification for the creation of political life in the thought of modernity, but further through the role of death as the tool of the sovereign to maintain its authority. The problem raised by Buddhist thought is not fundamentally different than that raised by Christianity. The modern state, through its justification in Hobbes, encompasses all facets on man's life. Though the

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<sup>75</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chapters I-III and Chapter IV, Paragraphs 20-21.

corrections of liberal thought have hewn in the power of the state to a degree that it cannot be understood as the same absolute sovereign presented in the *Leviathan*, the state nonetheless maintains enough hold on man that we have endowed it with capital authority. With the limited exceptions of self-defense, the modern state holds a monopoly on justified violence over man. On one hand, this is a concern of justice. We remove the power of punishment from the individual in order to ensure the maintenance of order and just administration of punishment. But through Hobbes it is made clear that coalescence of violence into the hands of the state is not simply a matter of ensuring due process. It is equally a matter of the maintenance of the state's authority. The sovereign's creation is premised on the fear of death from all directions in the chaotic state of nature, but its authority is continued through the threat of death that it can levy against any who transgress against the law. Political life in this regard is not self-sustaining. Even in entering into political life, man does not wholly escape the fear of violent death. He is instead simply comforted that its threat now emanates from only one source rather than many.

The state here is only as powerful as the people are afraid of its retribution. But this problem is complicated by the layers of man's being. Retribution can go beyond the merely temporal bounds of death for the man who understands his being as extending beyond the material. A second life through spiritual salvation undercuts completely the authority of Hobbes's state. Hobbes's presentation of the role of death in political life is intelligible only insofar as death is understood as a finality.<sup>76</sup> It is for this reason that Hobbes works so feverishly to bring the spiritual into the realm of his state. "For no man can serve two masters," Hobbes writes, "nor is he less, but rather more a master, whom we believe we are to obey for fear of

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<sup>76</sup> Seery, John. *Political Theory for Mortals: Shades of Justice, Images of Death*. Cornell University Press, 1996. Pg 9.

damnation, than he whom we obey for fear of temporary death.”<sup>77</sup> Both the rule of material life and the rule of eternal life are brought under the purview of his sovereign, as they must be for his system to sustain itself. Hobbes is thus able to negate the influence of Heaven by making his sovereign the arbiter of Hell. The problem presented for Hobbes by eternal life is corrected by coopting it into the powers of the sovereign. Though eternity may remain, its possibility is no longer a matter of ecclesiastical power and it now presents itself as much as a looming specter as a possibility for eternal salvation.

Buddhist thought offers Hobbes no comparable means of manipulation. Christianity posits an understanding of death that may present itself as either a good or a bad development, depending on one’s actions in life. Hobbes succeeds in interlacing the spiritual and the temporal in such a way that he can prioritize the fear of the bad over the possibility of the good, continuing his larger project of weaponizing risk aversion as a means to justify power.<sup>78</sup> Buddhist thought sidesteps this equation by removing the moral component from its understanding of death. Death in Buddhist thought, in and of itself, is neither a good nor an evil. It is merely a reality of the nature of existence as a part of *samsāra*. Regardless of one’s recent successes or failures as it relates to *kammic* standing, temporal death is merely neutral, at worst the beginning of a new attempt. In particular as it relates to role of fear as the foundation of the authority of the state, the Buddhist presentation of death as a component of *samsāra* maintains that material existence as understood by the individuated ego is merely transitory. The death of a person is no more morally substantial than the waning reverberations of an echo.

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<sup>77</sup> Hobbes, Thomas. *On the Citizen*. Edited by Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne. Cambridge University Press, 1998. Chapter Six.

<sup>78</sup> Hobbes’s understanding of human nature on this matter has been generally supported by modern psychological research on loss aversion. In their seminal work on the subject, Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky began a line of research which maintains that people are more concerned with avoiding loss than seeking gain and are inclined to act accordingly. Kahneman, Daniel and Amos Tversky. “Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk.” *Econometrica* 47: 263- 291. 1979.

The effect of the Buddhist idea of *samsāra* in relation to the Western conception of political authority hinges on the notion of temporality. The power which undergirds the authority of the state necessitates an understanding of death as the ultimate coercive tool. This itself requires that death be understood as a finality. This cannot be maintained within the Buddhist paradigm of the cycle of death and rebirth. This tension underscores a divide between the Western and Buddhist theories of punishment. This tension is noted by Buddhist scholar Stephen Batchelor, himself raised in the West before converting to Buddhism. The biographical story told by Batchelor in *Confessions of a Buddhist Atheist* is that of a man who, despite embracing many teachings of the Buddha, is ultimately forced to reject its metaphysical claims when unable to reconcile them with his Western conceptions of being. It is the notion of death and rebirth which proves the pivotal issue to Batchelor. Its importance to Buddhist thought, according to Batchelor, is such that “the entire edifice of traditional Buddhist thought stands on the belief in rebirth.”<sup>79</sup> Further, he notes the effects of this understanding as it relates to Western conceptions of morality. On his own coming to grips with the Buddhist understanding of *samsāra*, “It made me realize that belief in rebirth was a denial of death. And by removing death’s finality, you deprive it of its greatest power to affect your life here and now.”<sup>80</sup>

Though Batchelor is speaking in terms of ethics, within the context of the Hobbesian foundations of political life his observations are equally valid as a statement of the political effects of *samsāra* in relation to his theory underlying the modern Western state.<sup>81</sup> By denying the effects of death, Buddhist thought defangs the Hobbesian sovereign. The formation of

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<sup>79</sup> Batchelor (2010), Pg 37.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., Pg 53.

<sup>81</sup> Batchelor’s sentiment is echoed in the thought of Hannah Arendt. Arendt posits political life to be the of life action. Removing death from the equation, as we see with Buddhism, devalues the standing of life in comparison by removing the constraints of time. As described by George Kateb, for Arendt “what makes it good to have been born is thus what carries the chance that one will die young.” George Kateb, “Death and Politics: Hannah Arendt’s Reflections on the American Constitution.” *Social Research* 54: 605-616. 1987. Pg 616.

Hobbes's state is predicated on the notion that it is only through entering a political condition that man can escape the fear of violent death. If death is no longer a finality, and thus a matter of far lesser concern, the pressing urgency of removing one's self from the state of nature no longer holds sway. This issue is compounded as a matter of the continued authority of the state.

Removing man from the condition of violence present in the war of all against all is what spurs the creation of the state, but it is through the concentration of violence in the form of punishment into the hands of the sovereign which maintains the state's authority. Insofar as the sovereign represents a transference of the fear of death from the chaos of the many to the control of one force, the state requires that man fear the state's punishment in order to maintain its authority. The greatest and most forceful of these punishment is that of death, concentrated in the understanding of the justice of death as punishment through the legal mechanisms of state action. It is temporality which gives meaning to death. Divorced from the effects of time and the effects of the fear of death, man is left without the impetus to enter into political life nor to respect its authority once he enters it.

Within the context of man as an ego-driven creature, all ways of living are rendered more or less equal when viewed with a long enough window. In this regard, the Buddhist understanding of death negates the problem of the death of Socrates, but it equally negates the beauty of his project. Socrates' death caused the West to view politics as dangerous, albeit inescapable. The Buddha understands politics as a tool on the journey of moving beyond death into deathlessness. Though they differ in their understandings of the effects of death on man's life, both understand death as inherently tied to wisdom.

## CHAPTER FOUR: WISDOM AND THE POLITICAL ORDER

Though there are few instances of direct overlap in the traditions of political thought of Buddhism and the modern West, there is one significant parallel in their respective presentations of the origins of political life. In the *Aggañña Sutta*, the Buddha addresses the introduction of political authority into an ungoverned chaotic world. Despite the millennia separating the two, the creation of political life described by the Buddha very closely resembles that of Hobbes in the *Leviathan*. Both present the creation of political life as a necessity which arises from the miserable condition created by the flawed creatures which inhabit the pre-political world. What remains less clear, however, is the degree to which the Buddha and Hobbes agree on the political and philosophic consequences which arise from the coming together.

The coming together of ugly and immoral beings to choose a person to “show anger where, anger was due, censure those who deserved it, and banish those who deserve banishment” appears similar in form to the presentation of the social contract found in Hobbes.<sup>1</sup> Man is shown as living in an intolerable condition and believes that the only form of escape is coming together to agree to place political authority and the power of punishment in the hands of someone who can stem the elements of chaos.

Much has already been written on the prospect of referring to this coming together to select the *Maha-Sammata* (The People’s Choice) in the language of a social contract. Andrew Huxley, engaging in debate on the subject with Steven Collins, convincingly argues that the use of this language of contracts introduces more issues than it does clarity.<sup>2</sup> There is neither historical nor political evidence to suggest that either the Buddha or the political actors of his day

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<sup>1</sup> Walshe, Pg 413.

<sup>2</sup> See Huxley (1996), Collins (1996), and Steven Collins “The Discourse on What is Primary (Aggañña-Sutta): An Annotated Translation.” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 21: 301-393. 1993.

had a meaningful conception of anything like a Western notion of contract. Accordingly, to speak of the action of the *Aggañña Sutta* as the creation of a social contract is an anachronism which improperly colors our understanding of the texts.

In this regard, Huxley is absolutely correct. The language used to describe the coming together in the *Aggañña Sutta* is far less robust than anything found in Hobbes or Locke. We are told nearly nothing about the terms of this arrangement in the *Aggañña Sutta*. The beings collectively lament the evil that they see around them, and conclude that the proper solution is to give a store of rice to one among them to act against these behaviors. Interestingly, it is never addressed in the text precisely why this arrangement is superior to any other. The *Maha-Sammata* is described only as the most handsome, best looking, most pleasant, and most capable<sup>3</sup> of the beings. With the possible exception of most capable, none of these traits speak either to the political acumen or the physical strength and power of the *Maha-Sammata*. The question is raised then, why must this power be coalesced into the hands of one man at all? Hobbes makes clear that the state of nature ends only in what could be called an existential stalemate. Men are all equal, at least to the degree that they can kill or be killed equally by all. The creation of the sovereign comes about as a result of this equality. Their powers must all be combined in such a way that the sum can be greater than any of its constituent parts.

The *Aggañña Sutta* offers at least a brief description of what life looked like in its pre-political condition. Man, a creature which has come into existence as the result of a coarsening of a once greater being due to his desirous nature, is driven by craving. The result of this ravenous nature is a world defined by theft. A story is told of one particularly greedy being who takes control of a plot of land that was not rightfully his. Upon the discovery of this theft, the greedy

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<sup>3</sup> The text does not specifically elaborate in what regard in particular the *Maha-Sammata* may be the most capable.

being is seized and chastised, “You’ve done a wicked thing, taking another’s plot like that! Don’t ever do such a thing again!”<sup>4</sup> The being repents but continues to repeat his behavior. He is captured and censured four times according to the text. But the last of these instances is of particular interest. Here, beyond the simple rebukes of the prior incidents, the other beings this time enact violence upon him hitting him with sticks, stones, and their fists. The text explicitly puts forth this moment as the creation of punishment.

The very next paragraph of the text opens with the beings lamenting at the evils they see around them, and immediately goes on to describes the process of selecting the *Maha-Sammata* described above as a corrective to this issue. Missing from this presentation is anything like the justifications shown in Hobbes or Locke for the necessity of the social contract. The justification here is given only in the lamentation of the beings, and their quick action to remove themselves from the equation of violence and punishment that has just been instituted. What the text never addresses is the plausible alternatives to the presentation we are given. The text makes clear that ability of the mass of beings to exact punishment is sufficient to correctively censure any being among them who grows greedy. We are shown them doing it once, and there is no indication that they would be incapable of doing it again.

Control of the ills present in the Buddhist pre-political condition is at least possible, unlike what is described in Hobbes state of nature. It would seem then that life in the Buddhist pro-political condition would be *possible* to maintain. There is no existential need to remove themselves into a political condition as we find in Hobbes. What the text describes then is a story of the creation of political life which arises not out of existential necessity, and perhaps not out of necessity of any kind, but instead out a belief of those who come together to create it that the

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<sup>4</sup> Walshe, Pg 412.



actions necessary of a political ruler are so unpleasant and ugly that they wish to do whatever possible to remove and insulate themselves from them.

The presentation of the origins of political authority in the *Aggañña Sutta* demonstrates the fundamentally differing understanding of the primacy and preeminence of political life in Buddhist political thought compared to that of the West. The social contractarian origins of political authority of Western modernity approach the creation and maintenance of the state as not only a practical necessity but a moral necessity. Political life is not simply a means to correctly order man's interests, it is the sole mechanism which allows for the maintenance of a general condition of peace. Its importance cannot be overstated, and its origins and goals are noble.

The story we are told in the *Aggañña Sutta* is decidedly different. Political life here does not rise out of an existential necessity. Instead it arises out of the fact that the actions necessary to fulfill its purposes are inherently distressing and contrary to man's nature. Political authority is created, packaged, and condensed into the hands of a ruler not because there is no other way to accomplish their desired ends, but because the beings wish to remove themselves from actions of punishment. In this way, the creation of a coalesced political authority is not an acknowledgment of the fundamental goodness of the creation of political life but instead of the fundamental badness of political action itself. According to the *Aggañña Sutta*, politics is not something in which one hopes to participate. Rather it is something which one attempts to remove one's self from to the greatest degree possible. On this point, it is interesting to note the differences in the parties relevant to the social contract of each political tradition. In Hobbes, we are told that the contract is made amongst the people themselves, all with all. Participation is necessary at the individual level. Yet in the Buddhist formulation, the contract is made between the *Maha-*

*Sammata* and the people. There is thus a Buddhist theory of the political legitimization, but no corollary theory of participation in political life. Political action is a burden, and the burden of authority is placed into the hands of the *Maha-Sammata* not because this arrangement seems to be over-whelming more effective at controlling the evils of theft and lying than any other conceivable system but because it allows for the insulation of the mass of beings from the deleterious forces of political life. It is the creation of a political regime to the end of removing the necessity of individual political action.

From the *Aggañña Sutta* it is clear that Buddhist political thought views itself in a fundamentally different light than Western political thought. The motivations of the creation of political life in the Buddha's presentation demonstrate that politics is a valuable tool in that it allows for the corrective forces of punishment, but that it is equally understood as a brutish and burdensome device. Its inevitability arises not due to its inherent superiority in terms of efficacy, but instead because it allows for the greatest removal of society from the immoral actions necessary to partake in it.

### **Justice, *Dhamma*, and Demands of Political Life**

Beyond its presentation of the creation of political authority, the *Aggañña Sutta* further demonstrates the diminished standing of political life in Buddhist thought compared to its Western analogue in the way it addresses the relationship of politics and morality. Buddhist political thought and the political thought of the modern West place themselves on very different philosophic groundings. The West premises its thought on a conception of a stable and permanent individual, one guided by reason and subject to the forces of temporality and death. This allows for the creation of political life wherein the creation of a state is necessary for man to ensure a base level of tranquility, yet limits are placed on the powers and reach of this state in the

name of protecting the rights afforded to each individual solely insofar as he is a unique and valued individual. These competing interests demand a delicate balance, wherein the state is both the preeminent force in society, serving as the standard bearer for justice, yet is also held to certain defined limits beyond which it cannot rightly transgress. The modern Western state in this regard becomes a surrogate and outlet for man's highest ideals. Traditional structures of transcendence such as religious intuitions are relegated in favor of the civil religion built around the liberal principles of equality and democracy. Liberalism and the state apparatus are interlocked and serve to both simultaneously facilitate and limit each other. Justice, in the Western estimation, is found in and through their combination.

The place of justice in the tradition of Buddhist political thought is far murkier. Buddhist thought, political or otherwise, lacks a clear and direct cognate for the Western conception of justice. It is never the direct subject of the Buddha's limited political writings. Accordingly, its contours are left to be deduced from the writings available to us. But before attempting to unveil its form, it is worthwhile to take a moment to consider its origins. Though it is still oblique, the *Aggañña Sutta* does allow for one interesting observation in this regard, particularly in relation to the standing of justice in modern Western political thought.

In the *Aggañña Sutta*'s description of the pre-political condition of misery we see language throughout which makes clear that the experience of the beings in this state is not simply unbearable as a matter of comfort and safety but of morality as well. Throughout the description of the world of craving, intermixed with the descriptions of physical corruption such as a coarsening of their bodies to create a division between ugly and beauty, are descriptions of the standing of morality in this pre-political condition. The text speaks of creatures indulging in

“immoral practices.”<sup>5</sup> It also describes actions explicitly as “evil.”<sup>6</sup> Importantly, it is clear that these descriptions are not simply characterizations made by the narration of the text. The beings are described as being driven to lamentation by the evil nature of theft and lying. This clearly indicates that the creatures themselves were cognizant of the immorality of the pre-political condition and took their disgust at this immorality as their motivation to initiate the selection of the *Maha-Sammata*.

The conclusion here in relation to Buddhist political thought is that, despite their similarities, there is a fundamental distinction to be made between the Hobbesian state of nature and the comparable condition described in the *Aggañña Sutta*. In Hobbes’s depiction of the state of nature, he makes clear that though this condition may be miserable for man, it cannot be described as evil. Describing the nature of morality in the state of nature, he writes,

To this war of every man against every man, this is also consequent: that nothing can be unjust. The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, have there no place. Where there is no common power, there is no law; where no law, no injustice.<sup>7</sup>

Both morality and justice can only be understood within the context of a political condition for Hobbes. Not simply justice and injustice but even a meaningful conception of good and evil exist only by law and only after the creation of political life in the form of the sovereign. Upon the creation of a sovereign power, the populace is said to “confer all their power and strength” unto the sovereign.<sup>8</sup> While this seems like a base understanding of the transference of power to the sovereign, at least insofar as it speaks only to power and strength but not to the transference of any sorts of rights, this baseness is fitting given Hobbes’s understanding of that which is most

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., Pg 413.

<sup>7</sup> Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan: With Selected Variants from the Latin Edition of 1668*. Hackett Publishing, 1994. Chapter XIII.

<sup>8</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chapter XVII.

fundamental to man. In that man's equality stems directly from the power and strength which can be used to kill another, relinquishing these traits is perhaps the most important concession which could be made to the sovereign.

In this denial of a classical understanding of justice as metaphysical, Hobbes has lowered the realm of justice down to the powers of the sovereign. He speaks of this in Chapter Eighteen, where he writes that "It is true that they that have sovereign power may commit iniquity, but not injustice, or injury in the proper significance."<sup>9</sup> Justice does not exist prior to the sovereign, and upon the creation of the sovereign, justice is wholly that which is the will of the sovereign. Justice and injustice, good and evil, only come into existence following the creation of the political state and they equally can only be understood in its context.

Buddhist political thought, and Buddhist thought broadly, reject this notion out of hand. There is a connection shown here between the Buddhist understanding of good and evil and the necessity of political life. Again, we see an instance of the Western tradition placing a primacy on political life where the Buddhist tradition finds no apparent connection. Evidence of this understanding is given in the *Aggañña Sutta*. Beyond the direct representations of evil given prior to creation of political life, the *Aggañña Sutta* also makes a clear effort to situate itself historically. In describing the narrative of the text, its historicity is placed through description of the action which takes place in a seemingly repetitive cycle of expansion and contraction. The preface to the story of the creation of the corrupt world places its action at a time "when, sooner or later, after a long period, this world contracts... But sooner or later, after a very long time, this world begins to expand again."<sup>10</sup> This expansion signals the beginning of a period of rebirth, seemingly of existence itself. This condition is one of purity, which soon becomes corrupted,

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., Chapter XVIII.

<sup>10</sup> Walshe, Pg 409.

leading to the narrative of the text. But what this temporal placement demonstrates is that the actions of the *Aggañña Sutta*, both its depravity and its eventual righting, all takes place within the context of an over-arching theory of Buddhist history. This presentation is consistent with the understanding of history and temporality presented throughout greater Buddhist thought.<sup>11</sup>

Consistent with the overarching theme and tenets of *samsāra*, Buddhist teachings are presented within the context of a cyclical eternity, reminiscent of the Nietzschean Eternal Recurrence of the Same. What the *Aggañña Sutta* makes clear is that though these expansions and contractions signify destruction and creation of existence, they do not represent a wiping of the moral slate.

The same way that *kamma* is maintained throughout the process of death and rebirth, the *Aggañña Sutta* implies that the overarching moral structure of the universe is maintained throughout these existential cycles. Morality is not a function of convention nor is it capable of eradication. Though it may be in need of rediscovery, as we see in both the *Aggañña Sutta* and the *Lotus Sutra* (where the Buddha describes looking upon 18,000 Buddhas who have preceded him, one of which is said to have lived for one hundred billion years<sup>12</sup>), it nonetheless remains timeless, unchanged and ever-present.

Both implied in the Buddhist theory of history and made explicit in the actions of the beings in the *Aggañña Sutta*, Buddhist thought rejects the notion of the intrinsic inter-dependency of morality and political life. Contra Hobbes, the Buddhist tradition maintains that man exists within a moral universe regardless of his standing in a political universe. Buddhist thought thus implies a moral standard which exists (and has always and will always exist) which man is meant to try and bring himself in line with. Politics can serve as a creation to help meet the demands of morality, but it is only a tool to that end.

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<sup>11</sup> Prasad, Hari Shankar. "The Concept of Time in Pali Buddhism." *East and West* 38: 107-136. 1988.

<sup>12</sup> Kaufmann, Walter. *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*. Princeton University Press, 1990. Pg 404.

However, this conclusion raises an interesting observation. Throughout the political texts of the Pāli Canon, and throughout the traditional texts of Buddhist thought generally, though we see mentions of politics and mentions of morality, we do not see any meaningful and specific presentation of the idea of justice. Much of the issue here is conceptual. There is no proper cognate in the Buddhist lexicon equivalent to the differentiated Western conception of justice. But this does not mean that Buddhist political thought is blind to the concept. Scholars, seeking to discover a shared conceptual map between the two traditions, have typically come to identify the idea of justice with the Buddhist concept of *dhamma*.<sup>13</sup> While this identification has allowed for some shared space for conversation, the equating of justice to *dhamma* brings with it some issues.

The idea of *dhamma* within Buddhist thought has a breadth of definition which would be nearly impossible to overstate. In his attempt to outline the scope of the usage of *dhamma* within the texts of early Buddhism, Hukam Patyal determines that it, depending on its context, can be understood as having such varied meanings as statute, law, duty, justice, righteousness, virtue, or morality.<sup>14</sup> Traditionally, and in most common usages, *dhamma* is used to refer to either a broad conception of truth or specifically to the truths of the teachings of the Buddha. In this regard, *dhamma* is both extremely simple and enormously complicated. It is simple in that it can be understood as plainly being synonymous with that which the Buddha taught. Yet this seeming simplicity belies the reality that the teachings of the Buddha are not merely prescriptive pronouncements of how one should act but deeply philosophical presentations on the nature of

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<sup>13</sup> Carter, John Ross. "‘Dhamma’ as a Religious Concept: A Brief Investigation of Its History in the Western Academic Tradition and Its Centrality within the Sinhalese Theravada Tradition." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 44: 661-674. 1976.

<sup>14</sup> Patyal, Hukam Chand. "The Term Dharma: Its Scope." *Bulletin of the Deccan College Research Institute* 54: 157-165. 1994-1995.

being and the universe. In this respect, *dhamma* is not simply truth as expressed through convention (*sammuti-sacca*), meaning something like natural, observable sense and phenomena, but rather is truth in the “ultimate sense” (*paramattha-sacca*), expressing that “existence is a mere process of physical and mental phenomena within which, or beyond which, no real ego-entity nor any abiding substance can ever be found.”<sup>15</sup> Understood in this way, an attempt to define *dhamma* is impossibly expansive. To a degree, it would seem that this is intentionally so. Though the Buddha taught the *dhamma*, the texts of the Pāli Canon show a clear resistance by the Buddha to define and hew in the contours of the expanse of *dhamma*. In that it represents the truth of the totality of existence (and non-existence), it is fundamentally undefinable beyond its own abstraction. This creates difficulty when trying to understand *dhamma* in its context as meaning something like the Western idea of justice. Though few have had much success in the project, justice in the Western conception is an idea which is able to be differentiated, defined, and understood on its own terms. We are able to speak of and understand justice as an independent and distinct idea. Buddhist thought, by equating justice with the underlying fundamental Truths of Buddhist teachings, muddies the water on what precisely an abstract justice could entail because it must itself be only a part of a greater abstract concept.

Much as with the above discussion of rights, with the context of Buddhist political thought we rarely encounter talk of “justice” in an unqualified form. Though much is written and being written on Buddhist thought and social justice or economic justice, scarce little is said of justice simply. This is not a coincidence. The reason for these distinctions is that Buddhist political thought lacks a proper idea of justice as an abstract conception. Justice within the context of Buddhist political thought can only be understood within the context of its application.

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<sup>15</sup> Walshe, Pg 31.



Justice within the Buddhist tradition is not a detached concept, as it is traditionally understood in Western thought. Justice in this presentation cannot be understood as an abstraction because it is not capable of being abstracted. Justice is found in action, and particularly in action taken in line with *dhamma*. Because Buddhist justice is wholly contained within *dhamma*, the only way that we are able to distinguish justice from *dhamma* is in its employment. One cannot speak of justice in the Buddhist conception as an abstracted notion, like the Platonic Forms. Justice is *dhamma*, Buddhist wisdom, applied through political action. In this way, though justice (at least insofar as the term can be rightfully used within Buddhist political thought) is found in the action of political life, it is not defined by politics the way we see it presented in Hobbes. Political life and political action do not create justice, they merely are the pre-conditions necessary for its expression. The wisdom of *dhamma* is expressed in any number of ways and venues. When it is expressed in the political sphere, it can be roughly understood as justice.

### **Conclusion**

The primary essence of Buddhist political thought is that it is unintelligible apart from the greater Buddhist project. Both the Asokan and the Shambhalan models of rule must be understood within this context. Though they present themselves quite differently, both models are structured so as to attain the same ultimate goal. As with the greater Buddhist project, this end is the realization of wisdom. The differing presentations of the Asokan and Shambhalan models of governance point to a tension in Buddhist political thought regarding the nature and placement of wisdom as it relates to political life. This problem of the confluence of wisdom and political power is an ancient one within the Western tradition. Socrates' project of the construction of a perfect political life in thought in *The Republic* culminates in the attempt to bring together power and wisdom in hands of a philosopher king. Yet despite his attempt the

ultimate lesson of the *Republic* stands as the realization that best conceivable regime differs greatly from the best practicable regime. Equally, the lesson of the death of Socrates is that the forces of wisdom and power are always in tension with one another. This lesson was learned well by the Western moderns, who sought to remove this tension. This project reached its full culmination in the scheme of government outlined in the Constitution of the United States of America. Publius in *Federalist 51* lays out the case, in many instances echoing Hobbes in his portrayal of human nature, that if men were angels no government would be necessary. But we know from simple observation that men are not angels, and this remains the case despite millennia of attempts to make it otherwise. The solution then for Publius is not to attempt to change man's nature but to deal with it as we find it, setting each man's inherent selfishness against the predictable selfishness of every other. The resulting political life is not one of high principles, but it is one that is safe and reliable. In this way, the prototypical modern state, the government of the United States, is premised on the notion that we cannot rightly expect to find a coming together of wisdom and power, and given this we should place our bets elsewhere. This is the calculus underlying the modern political condition that the Buddhist states of South East Asia are attempting to enter.

Unfortunately, this fundamental premise of this Western project is in stark contradiction with the basic tenets of Buddhist political thought. Western political thought is premised on the idea that wisdom is rare and not likely to be held by most people. Buddhist thought does not view wisdom as unattainably elusive. The entire soteriological action of Buddhist thought makes clear that wisdom is widely available and attainable by all. This is the heart of the Buddhist project of leading man towards enlightenment. Accordingly, there is no fundamental tension between political life and truth in Buddhist thought. A Buddhist philosopher-king is not only

possible but expected. Even if he cannot reach these heights on his own, the political force of the *sangha* allows for the injection of wisdom whenever necessary. Outside of this Asokan understanding of political life, the Shambhalan model equally denies the premise of the modern Western political project which understand man as a fundamentally base creature. The Shambhalan model begins with the understanding that man is always trending towards wisdom. Even if it isn't currently possessed, man is always pointed towards it and at the very least possesses it in a significant enough degree that it can be used to shape political life.

Buddhist thought thus renders one of the most basic tensions of the Western political tradition, the relation of the wise man and the ruler, of wisdom and power, mostly moot. The presence and knowledge of *dhamma* negates the dangers inherent in the act of philosophy and the necessary and ever-present role of the *sangha* ensures that no ruler has to suffer the fate of Socrates. Wisdom and political wisdom are not distinct but synonymous in the Buddhist context, because justice is wholly contained within *dhamma*.

The necessary result of this relationship between wisdom and political life is that politics must always be understood as downstream from *dhamma*. In this regard, Buddhist political thought is fundamentally at odds and incongruous with the modern, morally detached political state. Beginning with Hobbes and continuing throughout the liberal tradition, the politics of modernity rest on the notion that man's existence must be made subservient to the political. The mere action of his birth renders him subject to the sovereignty of a social contract to which he was no direct party. The nature of this sovereign power is such that it encompasses the entire sphere of his existence. Even religion is brought under the umbrella of the state, both directly through the enforced maintenance of religious toleration and indirectly through the creation of an ersatz political religion based around the sanctity of the state itself.

Buddhist political thought reverses this understanding. The texts of the Pāli Canon give an understanding of political life wherein political power must be subservient to wisdom. The specifics of the Buddhist understanding of the universality of wisdom present demands for formulations of political rule which seek to place traditional Buddhist political principles within the framework of the modern liberal state. Buddhist political thought requires a coming together of wisdom and power. The modern Western project has seemingly abandoned this task, favoring instead a promotion of popular sovereignty as the fundamental requirement of political life. Though popular sovereignty does not offer much promise in the project of seeking wisdom as the foundation of political rule, it is nonetheless a necessary component of modern Western political life because of the emphasis placed there on the natural equality of all citizens. The liberal project sacrifices the possibility of a philosopher-king for the justice of equal rule for equal persons. Buddhist political thought cannot as easily maintain this distinction. Buddhist political thought does not place a requirement on man to discern or discover the proper contours of just action. The wisdom of proper political action is already provided by the truths of Buddhist *dhamma*. To be just, Buddhist political society must, both simply and necessarily, align itself with *dhamma* because justice is contained within it.

The question then is how best to align political life with *dhamma*. The answer for centuries of Buddhist political development, and the one most clearly prescribed in Pāli texts, is to have a strong leader who both seeks to guide his actions in light of the requirements of *dhamma* and also aligns himself with the formal, monastic *sangha*. As seen in movements like that of the Western-inspired socially-engaged Buddhism, this formulation has largely been rejected in contemporary Buddhist political discourse because of its obviously hierarchical nature. Favor is given instead to political formulations like that of the Shambhalan paradigm,

which presents an understanding of Buddhist political practice which is far more in line with contemporary goals and standards. Though there is some precedent in the Pāli texts for this political conception, it is only shown in a particular circumstance where the people in question are already shown to be living in line with what the Buddha considers to be morally upright practices. These are not conditions which are rightly met in contemporary political life, as this condition is incompatible with the modern, liberal principles of individual rights, particularly those of the freedom of religious practice. Though the policies they support are aligned with much of the contemporary liberal world, the project of the Shambhalan paradigm and socially-engaged Buddhism only work as well as the community in question is Buddhist, and right-practicing Buddhists at that. The liberal tradition is predicated on the notion that its foundations are built upon principles which are discernable to and applicable to all through the use of reason. Though Buddhism also claims the universality of its principles, these are not ideas which can be universally applied to all members of society. The justice of a Buddhist political order will only ever be compelling to Buddhist citizens.

The transition of the Buddhist world into the sphere of Western politics premises itself on the possibility of replacing the Buddhist *cakkavatti* with a modern state. This project, at least in comparison to the attempt to integrate Buddhist theories of being and self into the tradition of liberalism, seems more possible though still not without issue. As a matter of form, it is likely possible to replace traditional monarchies with institution which encompass popular rule. Though the justification for political authority in the Buddhist tradition lacks the foundation of individualism found in the Western tradition, there are nonetheless sufficient antecedents in Buddhist political theory to maintain popular institutions. However, it is less likely that these institutions can be understood as self-sufficient. Though Buddhist political thought is compatible

with Western orders, these orders are not likely to be able to maintain themselves without the support of the *sangha*. Buddhist political thought demands that political life be structured in such a way as to support the greater Buddhist project. If this influence can no longer be exerted by the monarch who guides his rule in light of the *dhamma*, then this role must be doubly filled by the *sangha*. Even within the context of the rule of the *cakkavatti*, the *sangha* has always been seen as a necessary political force to keep political life in check. However, given the movement of contemporary Buddhist thought to privilege a notion of the *sangha* as understood as the broader conglomerate of Buddhist practitioners rather than the traditional monastic order, it is unclear what this new arrangement could look like in practice. On its face, the maintenance of the role of the *sangha* by way of broad participation would seem to couple nicely with the movement towards republican regimes. In this regard, man in this regime simply serves two complementary roles simultaneously in the course of political participation— a political actor by way of participating in the political system and a spiritual actor by way of molding his actions in light of Buddhist principles. In this understanding, to act politically is to also act as a Buddhist. If we can identify the pool of political actors as the same as the pool of spiritual actors (by way of the contemporary, broad understanding of the *sangha*), then there is no need to view a tension between politics and wisdom. It simply becomes a matter of Buddhist practitioners partaking in Buddhist action, but as expressed through political participation. The *sangha* and the citizenry become as one, and spiritual action becomes synonymous with political action. This would be in many ways the fruition of the socially engaged Buddhist project.

Setting aside the issues presented to this understanding by the traditional Buddhist presentation of political life as something which is occasionally unavoidable but which should be avoided whenever possible, this coming together of self-governing political actor and Buddhist

practitioner would only ever be possible in a society wherein all citizens are practicing Buddhists. Buddhist political theory demands that politics remains subservient to *dhamma* and the project of enlightenment. If we are to remove the role of the formal *sangha* from political life and replace it with a modern state yet still hold true to the demands of Buddhist political theory, the introduction of wisdom into the political system must still come from somewhere. The last remaining avenue is through the citizenry, a populace which must be virtuous enough to serve as replacement for the monastic community as a guide for proper action. Though this may sound feasible, it is only so within the confines of a strictly controlled, wholly homogenous society. Such a project could never be undertaken in a culturally diverse pluralistic society like the United States. Recent developments raise the question of if this project can even be successfully undertaken with the context of such little diversity as the 90% Buddhist population of Myanmar.

Can mundane law replace wisdom within the confines of the demands of Buddhist political thought? Ultimately, to answer this question it must be decided if the movement of historically Buddhist countries into the sphere of Western political life is one of transition or one of syncretism. If it is the former and the goal of the Buddhist world is become full partners in the modern liberal project then it would seem that the enterprise can only be undertaken in light of an abandonment of the fundamental tenets of Buddhist political thought. Because the individual is not exalted, neither are his rights. Wisdom is given preference over liberty. Though it is possible to create a viable political order within these conditions, it is not possible to create a political order which satisfies the requirements of Western political life. If we understand political modernity as more than just a set of institutions and instead as the embodiment of liberal principles, then the program is defective from the matter of first principles.

**PART II: BUDDHIST POLITICAL THOUGHT IN MODERN PRACTICE**



## Introduction

Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries movement has been made, from both directions, to bridge the gap between the Buddhist world and the West. In Southeast Asia, countries mending from the trials of European colonialism have worked to recover their own cultural and political traditions while simultaneously attempting to integrate into the Western paradigm of economic globalization and political liberalization. In the United States and Europe, both awareness and practice of Buddhism exploded in the mid-twentieth century, spurred by both an increased availability of translations and scholarly works on the subject as well as an increased presence of Buddhism, and Eastern culture generally, in popular culture. The result has been a parallel movement of cultures towards one another. However, despite this shared project of cultural convergence, each side has taken a different focus as its point of emphasis. The story of the emergence of Buddhism into the Western consciousness has been one of a quest for religious enlightenment, focusing on Buddhism as a religious and philosophical disposition. Conversely, the process of post-colonial Westernization in the Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia has been one primarily of political and economic development. This process has entailed the introduction of Western political constructs such as constitutionalism, the establishment of Western political systems and institutions, and the introduction on Western concepts of political theory such as an explicit focus on human rights. Of these objectives, there has been much more success in the arenas of political order than that of political theory. As a matter of form and institutions, the nations of Southeast Asia (as well most of the broader Buddhist world, such as India and Japan) have taken on Western-style regimes, abandoning or lessening the role of their traditional Buddhist kingships in favor of democratic and republican institutions. However, despite these institutional changes there has been far less success in instituting a wide scale

change in political values. On one level, this is very understandable. Following decades of Western imposition, there is much for a Buddhist to be skeptical about regarding a project which calls for freely embracing the values of one's past oppressor over an attempt to recover the traditional values of your own culture which were lost during the period of colonial rule. This had led to something of an identity crisis in some parts of the Buddhist world, where a country like Myanmar is forced to deal with the realities of pluralism with its Muslim citizens, or in Bhutan, where the government has begun to reject globalist standards of success like Gross Domestic Product in favor of a Buddhist-driven measurement of Gross National Happiness.

These competing political, social, and historical tensions have led to a condition wherein contemporary Buddhist political life is something of a pastiche of Western and Buddhist political conventions. The à la carte approach to the reformulation of modern Buddhist political practice in the image of Western political life, choosing to embrace Western political institutions while making far less effort to embrace the values (such as political liberalism and individualism) which underlie their establishment in the Western world, has created a condition where it is difficult to make a clear assessment about the success of the project of the Westernization of the Buddhist political world. Much of this confusion hinges on what precisely are considered as the parameters for a "successful" transition. Is the dissolution of monarchies in favor of democratic institutions sufficient? Are we content with democratic forms or must Buddhist nations go further and embrace the tenets underlying liberal democracy? Though the judgment of the success or failure of this process is ultimately left only to the citizens of the countries in question, it is foolish to imagine that the Western world has no stake in the success or failure of the project or that it lacks any skin in the game itself. The same forces which have led to the attempted embrace of Western politics by the Buddhist world, namely technological modernization and

economic globalization, are those which justify Western attention to the outcome of the project. If Buddhist countries wish to be embraced by the modern global political community, and evidence suggests that this is in fact the case, then the West is justified in wishing to ensure that this process is undertaken on the proper terms.<sup>1</sup>

In Part II of this dissertation, I will examine the practical ramifications of the philosophic disconnect between the foundations of Western political thought and Buddhist political thought. I will do so by examining the process of political and philosophic development in two separate arenas, exploring both the effects of political Westernization on historically Buddhist countries and the changes which have taken place in Buddhist political thought as it has been applied in the West by Western practitioners in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Chapter Five will focus on Myanmar. Myanmar holds an interesting place in the study of the transition of historically Buddhist countries into the Western sphere of political life. As with all of the Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia, Myanmar is not a stranger to Western influence. For nearly a century and a half in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Myanmar (then Burma) was ruled by Great Britain, first as a province of British India and later as a colony in its own right. Finally freed of its colonial status following World War II, Myanmar spent the next several decades trying to find its political footing, settling for most of that time into a military-led socialist regime. Beginning in 2008, a series of political reforms were undertaken, focusing mostly on instituting some semblance of democracy into the country. Though the first few

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<sup>1</sup> All of the historically Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia (understood as Bhutan, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand) are currently members of the United Nations and the International Monetary Fund. Additionally, Burmese diplomat U Thant served as the first non-European Secretary-General of the United Nations from 1961-1971. These same countries are also members or currently seeking membership (Bhutan) in the World Trade Organization.

applications of this new democratic trend were of questionable success, since 2012 the Republic of the Union of Myanmar has mostly lived up to its new moniker.

Despite the successes of this democratic transition, the process has been marred by a new form of political oppression. The past few years have seen a sharp rise in anti-Muslim sentiment throughout the country. Echoing well-established ethnic divisions in the country, persecution against the Muslim Rohingya in Myanmar's Rakhine State has risen to the level of an international human rights crisis and has gone so far to be referred to by some, now including the United Nations, as a genocide. Despite the expectation of many in the international community, the country's Buddhist leadership has not only failed to stave off continued violence against the Rohingya but have in some instances contributed to its continued propagation. This failure has extended all the way to Aung San Suu Kyi, the most vocal and well-known leader of Myanmar's democratic campaign and herself a recipient of the Noble Peace Prize. Flouting all expectations, this political leader known for her support of the down-trodden and her predilection for peace has remained disconcertingly quiet on the atrocities committed in her own backyard and under the watch of her political regime.

Through the lens of this crisis I will examine the apparent failure of Buddhist political thought to itself serve as a sufficient replacement for political liberalism. The treatment of the Burmese Rohingya is evidence of issues which arise when trying to import Western political structures into an environment which fails to also adopt its philosophical underpinnings. The push for democratization in Myanmar is an admirable project, but the Burmese Buddhist political culture's inability to control (let alone its apparent tendency to bolster) the political divisions created by ethnic divides in the country belies a greater issue. Can a country adopt the forms of Western politics while setting aside its groundings? Are democratic institutions sufficient as a

measure of upholding contemporary standards of political dignity or must countries also embrace the liberal beliefs which have served as the undergirding of those institutions throughout Western modernity? And in particular, to what degree can the principles of Buddhism, which themselves mirror liberal thought in a number of practical respects, serve as a replacement to these liberal values in their absence? Despite the overlap between the two systems of thought, the case of contemporary Myanmar seems to demonstrate the dangers of attempting to base a politics of liberal freedom and human rights strictly on the principles of Buddhist political thought.

Buddhist thought and practice makes a clear call to respect human dignity. But a Buddhist state is only as respectful of these principles as its political actors are good Buddhists. Though its prospect seems far less threatening, a state built on Buddhist political principles is no less poorly founded than any other theocratic regime. Myanmar represents a movement away from a country built solely in the service of traditional religious principles towards a modern state equipped to exist within the context of a modern, globalized world. But, as it stands, it is only a half measure. And as a half measure it has succeeded in half of the goal that the standards of modern liberalism would set for it, allowing for self-rule and political agency for much of the country but equally allowing the tyranny of the majority to feast upon those in the religious and ethnic minority.

In Chapter Six I will move away from examining Buddhist political thought as it is put into contemporary practice in its native context and examine how Buddhist political thought itself is changing as it intermingles with the West and Western Buddhist practitioners. From the perspective of Western political theory, the most striking feature of the political theory of the Pāli Canon, and traditional Buddhist political thought generally, is ultimately how *apolitical* it is. Though politics has a discernable role in human life, it is decidedly secondary and is only intelligible within the larger context of Buddhist thought and practice. It has no notable value

strictly in and of itself, merely in service to the larger Buddhist project. The contemporary Western political movement of socially-engaged Buddhism seeks to change this understanding.

Begun as a direct response to the horrors of the Vietnam War, the Engaged Buddhism movement was crafted as a means to allow Buddhists a meaningful way to be involved within the political and social realm. Though undertaken in explicitly Buddhist terms, socially-engaged Buddhism is frequently presented as an attempt to bring Buddhist principles and action in line with the precepts of Western thought, and accordingly most of its writing takes place in English. The topics tackled by engaged Buddhism are by and large the same as that of contemporary progressive liberalism, namely consumerist materialism, social justice broadly construed, and a critique of neo-liberal economic colonialism. On a strictly pragmatic level, socially-engaged Buddhism is the attempt to harness and make political hay of the natural overlap between Buddhist thought and modern liberal politics. But more importantly, engaged Buddhism is rightly viewed as an attempt by Western-minded thinkers to make Buddhism applicable to the Western context, which is to say to make Buddhism *political*. In this chapter I will examine the rise of engaged Buddhism and attempt to show that, while it may be useful as a tool of political expression for Buddhist practitioners, it does not represent a meaningful philosophic revolution in Buddhist political thought and is not in itself sufficient to ground a proper new Buddhist political theory which is congruent with the modern political condition.

Through engaged Buddhism, and the twentieth century diffusion of Buddhism to the West generally, we can see the opposite of the case of Myanmar. There we find evidence of the issues inherent in trying to graft a Western politics onto an underlying Buddhist political condition. But through socially-engaged Buddhism we see movement in the other direction, the attempt of Buddhism to re-root itself in the West. If the considerable goal of transplanting the

strict structures of Western politics onto a Buddhist condition cannot be achieved, can the more modest goal of transplanting the comparatively agreeable tenets of Buddhism into a new context be accomplished?

While Myanmar demonstrates the perils of trying to force a Western state structure onto a Buddhist political condition, the rise of engaged Buddhism shows that the two political traditions are not wholly incompatible. Yet this does not mean that the relationship is without its perils. Buddhism preaches tolerance, but it does so using the language of Buddhist compassion, not of Western rights. Buddhism is effective in creating a politics that is compatible with Western liberalism, but it cannot do so on Western liberalism's terms. The issue arises, like that in Myanmar, that a politics built on compassion is only as well-grounded and compassionate as the citizens within it. Without the institutional and constitutional protections of the Western state, a promise of compassion means little. Further, the principles of engaged Buddhism ultimately fail to constitute a meaningful political theory in and of themselves any more than the Christian Golden Rule constitutes a true political theory. Engaged Buddhism can be a valuable tool when employed within the pre-existing political structures of the West but beyond that it remains hollow. Engaged Buddhism offers guidance to individual action, but it does not address how these tenets are to be successfully codified or enacted at a societal level, particularly within a pluralistic context. Looking at both the rise of engaged Buddhism and the situation in contemporary Myanmar, it would seem that Buddhism can survive in any political condition but not every political condition can survive in Buddhism.

## CHAPTER FIVE: MYANMAR

The recent attention of the international community on the country of Myanmar has come for all of the wrong reasons. Buddhist monks, viewed by the world as politically detached proponents of peace, are accused of promoting hate against the country's Muslim Rohingya population and of fostering the conditions which have led to what many in the international community are coming to refer to as a genocide and ethnic cleansing. The behavior of the monks and greater Buddhist community in Myanmar has been viewed as so shocking to those in the West precisely because it so thoroughly violates the traditional Western understanding of Buddhism as a religion and culture of openness and acceptance. Images and stories of hundreds of thousands of displaced Rohingya, expelled from Myanmar by a combination of state security forces and violence precipitated against them by many of the Burmese population at large, has forced the West to take a step back and look anew at the process of integration being undertaken by the countries of the Buddhist world. As with the failures of the Arab Spring, the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar forces us to evaluate the importance of democratic principles when they are divorced from the larger context of liberalism in which they developed and flourished. The process of democratization in Myanmar, begun in earnest in 2008 and realized with free elections in 2012, was seen by many as a welcome departure away from the decades of harsh military rule in favor of modern political development and self-rule. Even among the Rohingya population itself there was a hope that the rise to power of the National League for Democracy (NLD) party, led by international icon and recipient of the Noble Peace prize for her work to free Myanmar from oppressive rule Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, would help to bring an end to their situation.<sup>1</sup> The intervening years since the 2012 election which brought the NLD to power have

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<sup>1</sup> Ramzy, Austin. "After Myanmar Elections, Few Signs of a Better Life For Muslims." *The New York Times* 18 November 2015. Web. 9 September 2018.



clearly demonstrated that this is not the case. Rather than working to end the violence by integrating the Rohingya into Burmese society, Aung San Suu Kyi's government has only continued (if not escalated) the crisis, largely turning a blind eye to the suffering and framing the situation not as a human rights failure on their part but as an immigration dispute with neighboring Bangladesh (the original home of many of the Rohingya prior to their dispersal following World War II). The failure of Buddhists to act in the face of this obvious human rights crisis, multiplied by the fact that the foundations of the crisis are rooted in Burmese Buddhist nationalism, demonstrate the difficulties of resting one's hope on the idea that Buddhist countries will uphold liberal values, let alone principles of basic decency, simply on the basis of their foundations in the teachings and practices of Buddhism. Though the history of Myanmar is long and complicated, the one steady factor for nearly a millennia has been the standing of Buddhism as a source of structure and morality for the country. The failures of a Buddhist politics to live up to the basic standards of Western political life here, where Buddhism is arguably most deeply ingrained, points to the fact that Buddhism, in and of itself, may not be a sufficient bedrock upon which to build a Western-style liberal state.

### **The Political Background of Burma/Myanmar**

The history of Myanmar is inseparably intertwined with Buddhist practice.<sup>2</sup> This is not simply a matter of historical legacy, but a much deeper matter of culture and identity. According

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<sup>2</sup> A brief note on the nomenclature of Burma versus Myanmar- This distinction is far more rooted in politics than any historical or cultural convention. Both Burma and Myanmar are derived from different transliterations of the name of the same ethnic group, the majority Bamar. In this regard, it is a distinction without a true difference. The name "Burma" originates from the British colonial era, given to the region as it was the land of the Burmans (Bamars). The new name of Myanmar was introduced by the country's military government in 1989, primarily as a means of distancing the country from its colonial heritage and putting forward a veneer of ethnic unity and cohesion. There is also no consistent usage in the international community, with the United Nations officially recognizing the country as Myanmar and individual countries, such as the United States, continuing to use Burma. As a matter of style, I follow the convention laid out by Matthew J. Walton (2018). This entails speaking of the country as

to Aung San Suu Kyi, “To be Burmese is to be Buddhist.”<sup>3</sup> Though Myanmar might not be the most ancient of Buddhist countries, with Buddhism not being formally introduced until the reign of King Anawrahta in 1044 CE, Myanmar nonetheless understands itself as “the standard-bearer of world Buddhism.”<sup>4</sup> This obsession with purity and identity colors much of the Burmese understanding of Buddhism and its relation to political and social life.

The Burmese Buddhist preoccupation with purity and tradition is linked to its interpretation and practice of Buddhist thought. The vast majority of Burmese Buddhists (who themselves make up nearly 90% of the population of Myanmar) are adherents to the Theravāda tradition. This tradition, the most ancient branch of Buddhist practice, takes the texts of the Pāli Canon as its predominant guide. This has obvious practical effects for the Burmese understanding of political life, as the Burmese political tradition draws heavily from the lessons of the *Aggañña Sutta* and *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta*.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, the ancient Burmese political tradition was built around the Buddhist notion of kingship, placing an emphasis on the role of the king as a moral guide just as much as that of his role as a political leader. Though adopting Buddhism relatively early within the region, the foundations of the Burmese kingship (and much of the Burmese political order generally) were not themselves wholly original and were transposed quite directly from the political traditions of nearby Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). These traditions were themselves heavily influenced by the native traditions of its neighboring India.<sup>6</sup>

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“Burma” prior to the name change, and as “Myanmar” after. When speaking of the country generally, “Myanmar” is used. When describing things related to the country, regardless of time period, “Burmese” is used.

<sup>3</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi. *Freedom from Fear*. Viking, 1991. Pg 83.

<sup>4</sup> Von Der Mehden, Fred. “Buddhism and Politics in Burma.” *The Antioch Review* 21: 166-175. 1961. Pg 167.

<sup>5</sup> Walton, Matthew J. *Buddhism, Politics, and Political Thought in Myanmar*. Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pg 66.

<sup>6</sup> Bechert, Heinz. “Theravada Buddhist Sangha: Some General Observations on Historical and Political Factors in Its Development.” *Journal of Asian Studies* 29: 761–78. 1970. Pg 766.

## The Traditional Era

This chain of relationships, neatly connecting Burma to the Buddhist homeland of India, have contributed to a few unique quirks of Burmese Buddhist practice compared to its Buddhist cohorts in Southeast Asia. Though Myanmar is not alone in founding its Buddhist practice on the Theravāda tradition and the Pāli texts, it does differentiate itself in a number of ways. Donald Smith, in his study of the political practices of ancient Burma, notes that though Burmese kings understood themselves on Buddhist terms, many of the traditions of the Burmese kingship were themselves rooted in the Hindu practices of India. Some of these characteristics are mainly superficial, such draping the coronation ceremony in Brahmanical trappings. But some of these changes were more substantial and effected the underlying understanding of the role of the king in Burmese society. Speaking of the tensions created by these competing poles of tradition, Smith writes,

The Hindu tradition of kingship attributed divine status to the king and emphasized the need for the ministrations of Brahman priests at the palace and the magical potency of the court regalia. The Buddhist tradition of kingship emphasized the ruler's function as the defender of the faith, the builder of pagodas, the patron and protector of the sangha. The Hindu tradition emphasize the ruler's ritually legitimated status; the Buddhist tradition lay stress on his religious function. These two kinds of religious sanction, of course, coalesced in popular attitudes of reverence for the king in Burma.<sup>7</sup>

Beyond the syncretic difficulties posed by the foreign ghosts embedded in Burma's transplanted form of Buddhist practice, Smith notes two more idiosyncrasies throughout the traditional form of Burmese Buddhist political practice. The first regards the fundamental importance that traditional Burmese Buddhist political practice places upon the role of the king as a component of the greater Buddhist project. Though all Buddhist political practice of the pre-

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<sup>7</sup> Smith, Donald Eugene. *Religion and Politics in Burma*. Princeton University Press, 2016. Pg 20.

modern era placed a great deal of emphasis of the role of the king as a moral exemplar and *cakkavatti*, this practice was even more greatly emphasized within Burmese practice. Though no wide scale religious conversion could be considered easy, this was particularly true of the movement towards Buddhism from the traditional folk religions in early Burma. The early decades following the conversion of Burma to a Buddhist country by King Anawrahta in the mid-eleventh century saw Anawrahta and his successors engage in a lopsided battle against the native animistic *nat* religious practice.<sup>8</sup> His project (though clearly successful in the end) was met with such harsh resistance among the people that he was forced to relax his insistence on strict adherence to traditional Buddhist practices. These allowances away from orthodoxy were expanded, as a matter of practicality against the continued sentiment of the Burmese, by Anawrahta's successor, to the degree that *nat* worship still makes up a meaningful part of Burmese Buddhist religious practice today, creating a unique syncretic practice particular to Myanmar.<sup>9</sup> This struggle by the Buddhist kings against the indigenous religion of Burma accomplished more than simply creating another example of Buddhism's pragmatic skill at morphing and adapting to its newfound contexts. The political ramifications of this struggle helped to inform the way that the Burmese kings understood their role as promulgators of Buddhist doctrine. Because the process of converting the population to Buddhism was so fraught with difficulty, the Burmese monarchs were forced to take an even greater role in religious matters as a means to bolster Buddhism's standing and curtail backsliding into the old faith.<sup>10</sup> As a consequence, even more than most Buddhist kings the rulers of Burma were not merely political figures but moral and spiritual figures as well. Beyond simply serving as an upright

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<sup>8</sup> Maung Htin Aung. "Folk-Elements in Burmese Buddhism." *The Atlantic* February 1958. Web. 27 September 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Walton (2018), Pg 70.

<sup>10</sup> Smith (2016), Pg 14.

moral exemplar and a builder of pagodas, Burmese kings were forced to actively promote the faith, even beyond a timeframe of what could typically be considered a period of religious transition and cultural reorientation. This process was not typically undertaken by forcing Buddhism upon the population directly, but rather through a multi-faceted process of attempting to curtail the native animistic beliefs through legislating away some of their behavior that was considered more repugnant to Buddhist sensibilities, such as ritual sacrifice, and through more traditional approaches like missionary work undertaken in common with the *sangha*.<sup>11</sup> Even then, most of the kings' success were found in the areas closest to the capital, with the outlying areas and the regions to the north remaining far less devout to the new practices.<sup>12</sup>

The second unique characteristic of Burmese Buddhism relates to the *sangha*. Throughout Buddhist history, and since its inception, one key facet of the organization of Buddhist *sanghas* is their non-hierarchical nature. Within the structure of the *sangha*, all practitioners are considered equal. This is not to say that traditional *sangha* structures are merely anarchic, but rather that what hierarchies do exist are based solely on seniority and the powers granted are minimal and mostly administrative rather than authoritative.<sup>13</sup> This was not the case in pre-colonial Burmese Buddhist practice, which instead adopted the position of *thathanabaing*, or great ruler of the *sangha*, as a mechanism through which to create a stable order throughout the Buddhist *sangha* of the country in the hope of creating a more viable network of coordination and control. As a matter of religious study, the hierarchical nature of the Burmese *sangha* is interesting not solely because it is such a departure from traditional Buddhist practice but also because it is also likely a continued reflection of the Ceylonese and Indian influence into

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., Pg 24-25.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., Pg 25.

<sup>13</sup> The obvious caveat to this understanding is in the tradition of Tibetan practice, which features an overtly hierarchical structure capped by the religio-political leader, the Dalai Lama.

Burmese Buddhist practice, with the increased comfort with hierarchical organization being a reflection of the latter's Brahmanic culture. But these changes are also very interesting from the perspective of the relationship between Burmese Buddhist practice and politics. Though the *thathanabaing* was undoubtedly a religious position, overseeing the administration of all religious affairs as well resting as "supreme in all matters connected with religion," the *thathanabaing* was not appointed by way of seniority or even for his piety amongst the members of the *sangha* itself, as may be expected from traditional Buddhist practice. Instead, both the *thathanabaing* and the council of monks which he oversaw were appointed directly by the Burmese monarch.<sup>14</sup> This intermixing of monarchical power directly into the structure of the *sangha* itself represents an influence which extends well beyond any traditional Asokan notions of the Buddhist king who helps further the moral standing of his people through a close relationship with the *sangha*. Traditional theories of Buddhist rule task the king with supporting and helping to maintain the standing of the *sangha* but the Burmese role of the *thathanabaing* shows precisely how intertwined the two realms of politics and religion have been in Myanmar since its early, pre-colonial history.

This is not to say however that, by way of being appointed by the king, the position of *thathanabaing* was simply that of a puppet to do the king's work in the name of the Buddha. As much as the position was one of religious authority, its powers bled over into the political sphere as well. The *thathanabaing* served as the head of the monastery of the capital, both allowing him access to the king (and the force of arms which came with him) and allowing the king the ability to keep close eye and guard over him. Beyond serving as the final arbiter on matters of religious

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<sup>14</sup> Kyaw, Aye. "The Sangha Organization in Nineteenth Century Burma and Thailand." *Journal of the Siam Society* 72: 166-196. 1984.

doctrine, the *thathanabaing* and his council also served a quasi-judiciary role as a mediator and settler of disputes.<sup>15</sup>

The role of the *thathanabaing* exemplifies that greater entwining of the Burmese *sangha* and the political sphere generally. Whereas in most Buddhist traditions it is customary for the king to support the *sangha* (and glean off a certain level of legitimacy for himself in the process) and in turn for the *sangha* to keep its hands clean of the dirt of mundane political affairs, the relationship between the king and the *sangha* in the traditional, pre-colonial era of Burma showed a distinct breakdown of these norms. For the cost of having the king select the leadership of the *sangha* of the capital<sup>16</sup>, the *sangha* was afforded more control and powers which were quite unique within the spectrum of arrangements throughout the Buddhist traditions of Southeast Asia. Smith describes the traditional Burmese *sangha* as holding the role of “a powerful agent of social control.”<sup>17</sup> Some of these roles, such as being the sole force of education in the country, are powerful but not unique to the Burmese arrangement. Others, such as the role of the *sangha* as those responsible for the collection and maintenance of the Burmese legal codes, are more singular. But the most important powers of social control held by the *sangha* were more informal than formal. As with most traditional Buddhist political arrangements, the *sangha* served a role as a legitimizing force for the king in exchange for his continued support

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<sup>15</sup> Smith (2016), Pgs 16- 17 and 32.

<sup>16</sup> Though the *sangha* of the capital was viewed as the controlling and most prestigious *sangha* of the country, this should all be understood within the context of the history of Burma’s loosely-connected nature. Despite holding claim to large swaths of land, throughout the history of Burma rulers were rarely particularly effective in actually governing over the scope of their territories. Though they were firmly in charge of the region surrounding their capital, their power was increasingly less recognized and executed the further away one went. In these instances, most governing affairs were handled by a combination of local regents and religious authorities in the *sangha*. However, as with the case of the king, the power of the central *sangha* led by the *thathanabaing* wasn’t much more effective in its dispersion than that of the monarch. Despite his standing as the final authority on religious affairs in the country, most *sanghas* were remote enough that they were essentially self-sufficient and self-governing. As Walton (2018) notes, “the *sangha* authority remained decentralized in Burma until the late twentieth century.”

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., Pg 31.

and defense of the *sangha*. In the case of Burma, rather than simple acquiescence the Burmese *sangha* would occasionally assert itself as an active force within the political sphere. Frequently this intercession would take the form of preaching mercy to the king, seeking to lessen the hardships placed on the people by unpayable tax debt or to spare the lives of prisoners of war.<sup>18</sup> The monastic proclivity for wisdom and peace would also be harnessed by the Burmese kings by sending *sangha* leaders on diplomatic missions to other countries sympathetic to Burma's Buddhist culture, such as Ceylon and China.<sup>19</sup>

The ancient understanding of the relationship between religious power and political power in Burma, begun in the eleventh century and continued on in modified form into the colonial era, is one of interconnectedness and blurred distinctions. The spread of Buddhism in the country only came about, after much struggle, through a concerted effort by the Burmese monarchy. In exchange for its efforts, the Burmese kings of the traditional era found in the *sangha* an edifying force to legitimize their power. The relationship continued with this spirit of reciprocal benefit mixed at the expense of shared power throughout the traditional era. In turn, the *sangha* relied upon the monarchy to both fund and protect it. This position too was not without strings however, as the leadership of the *sangha* was installed and appointed by the king, and would reside in the capital where they would be clearly under the king's watch and influence. Yet once installed the religious rulings of the *thathanabaing* were never placed in question by the king, and the *sangha* itself was allowed certain powers that in the West would typically be understood as falling under the purview of the state, such as its own judiciary and the ability to intercede into royal matters when it felt it necessary. Some monks would be brought to serve in the king's administration, and despite a general prohibition from engaging in

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<sup>18</sup> Gravers, Pg 302.

<sup>19</sup> Smith (2016), Pg 33.



political action a few monks throughout Burmese history even served as kings themselves.<sup>20</sup> This intertwining is so great as to be described by Smith as constituting “a check on the exercise of the king’s absolute power.”<sup>21</sup> Reading the above description, one takes away an impression that the relationship between the Burmese king and the Burmese religious leadership could be drawn at least in part from the pages of Montesquieu, mimicking an understanding of the separation of powers. But we must take care when viewing this relationship and keep in mind that these are not co-equal branches of a political system. Through all of this, members of the *sangha* would largely maintain the traditional Buddhist stance that politics are an affront to *kammic* standing and that mundane political life should be avoided whenever possible. In reality, this is an intermingling of two separate spheres of influences, that of religion and the state. The *sangha* did not receive the political power it had because it was a proper political actor. It was able to leverage its power in the moral sphere of influence to assert itself politically. The political system of ancient Burma was thus not theocratic, but it nonetheless represented a blurring of the distinction between the two spheres of politics and morality to the degree that a substantial change in one would likely necessitate an equal reaction in the other. Unfortunately for the Burmese tradition, precisely this situation would arise with the arrival of the British colonial era in the early nineteenth century.

Burma in the early nineteenth century prior to British colonization was a success among the region. Positioned between India and China and possessing a port structure in its capital which would see more action than that of New York City in the same era, pre-colonial Burma was well positioned to sustain itself for some time.<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately for the Burmese, the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., Pg 35.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., Pg 34.

<sup>22</sup> Charney, Michael W. *A History of Modern Burma*. Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pg 19.

Konbaung Dynasty was perhaps a bit too sure of its position and began to expand its territories into the lands bordering British India, leading eventually to the First-Anglo Burmese War in 1824. Despite pushing the British project in India to near financial ruin in the process, the Burmese capital of Rangoon was eventually taken, and Burma was forced to surrender not only the lands they had taken to encroach upon the British but much of their fiscal sovereignty as well. In retribution for the financial hardships that they suffered as a part of the conflict, the British instituted a treaty which crippled Burma to a degree from which it could never properly recover. Having been sufficiently weakened economically, and again weakened militarily in two subsequent wars in 1852 and 1885, Burma was finally annexed by the British in 1885 and made a province of British India.

### **The Era of British Colonialism**

This subjugation into the British Empire marked the end of the traditional era of Burmese history, and brought with it a number of political changes, both structural and cultural, which still inform the workings of the country today. The first of these was the disruption of the balance of temporal and spiritual power by the British, deposing the Burmese king and rupturing the leadership of the *sangha*. Though the early efforts of the British to fracture the pre-existing Burmese order were undoubtedly successful, they had some help in the situation in the already turbulent political conditions of the Burmese regime in the years leading up its final defeat. In anticipation of the colonial forces bearing down upon them, King Mindon (the penultimate ruler of the Konbaung dynasty that began its rule in 1752) attempted to push through a series of ill-founded reforms, such as publishing a state-controlled newspaper and taking a greater role in directing the *sangha*, meant to gird the regime against the looming colonial threat.<sup>23</sup> The rippling

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<sup>23</sup> Walton (2018), Pg 22.

consequences of these reforms was a fracturing of the *sangha* structure and hierarchy, with the ultimate result being the appointment of two separate *thathanabaings* by Mindon's successor, King Thibaw. These appointments would prove to be the last for some time, as the British colonial authorities would refuse to appoint another until 1904.

These sweeping political changes would soon be felt on a social level. In the decades following the dissolution of the monarchy and the weakening of the *sangha*, a strong feeling began to arise throughout Burma of experiencing a cultural, and by extension moral, collapse.<sup>24</sup> The result was the formation of a series of Buddhist nationalist organizations, created to help stave off the moral decay left in the vacuum of the disappearance of the traditional monarchic-*sangha* structure. The most famous of these was the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA), founded in 1906, with the intention to help form and create a modern Buddhist cultural identity that could serve as a vehicle for navigating the increasingly choppy waters of Westernization.<sup>25</sup> Though rather moderate in its disposition, the YMBA was the fountainhead for a number of more radicalized groups that would follow, most notably the General Council of Burmese Associations in 1917. This increasing radicalization finally found its full expression in the 1930 among the Burmese students educated in Western-style universities, such as the University of Rangoon in the capital city. These radical students would take on the title of *Thakin*, or master, as a way to express their lack of submission to the colonial elite by mocking their insistence on formal titles.<sup>26</sup> Through the Marxist and socialist ideas popular among these students, the foundations for the politics of the early years of Burmese independence were

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<sup>24</sup> Charney, Pg 31.

<sup>25</sup> Lintner, Bertil. *The Resistance of the Monks: Buddhism and Activism in Burma*. Human Rights Watch, 2009. Pg 12.

<sup>26</sup> Holliday, Ian. *Burma Redux: Global Justice and the Quest for Political Reform in Myanmar*. Columbia University Press, 2012. Pg 37.

formed and the *Thakins* themselves, including future leaders U Nu and Aung Sang (the father of Aung San Suu Kyi), were prominent among the early political leaders of this era. It is in the formation of these groups, a response to the dissolution of the traditional Burmese political and cultural norms, that we find the seeds of the modern condition of Myanmar.

Burma, partially for practical reasons such as topography and partially for more political reasons like that relatively disconnected and localized organization of the country's *sangha* structure, never fully coalesced as the country we now understand it to be prior to the early to mid-twentieth century. Though the country took its name from the Burman majority ethnic group which comprises around two-thirds of the total population, there are a number of other well-represented minorities in the country, such as the Shan and Karen peoples. David Brown, in assessing the politics of Burma prior to the introduction of the modern state by the British colonial administrations, points out that though these ethnic divisions have existed in Burma for centuries, they were not a dominant political force prior to the twentieth century. "Politics, indeed," he writes, "frequently focused on tensions between majorities and minorities, but these terms referred not to ethnic categories, but to disparities of power, amongst the competing power centres of the various Buddhist kingdoms (Burman, Mon, Shan, and others), and between these power centres and those lacking power."<sup>27</sup> He goes on describe the political alignments and identities of the traditional period as shifting and fluid.<sup>28</sup> Viewed in this light, the Buddhist nationalist movements of the early and mid-twentieth century in Burma appear far more novel than they might without this context. The attempt by this Buddhist nationalist movement to create what could be called a pan-Buddhist identity from what was before simply competing tribes was innovative yet generally successful. However, in the process of creating from nearly

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<sup>27</sup> Brown, David. *The State and Ethnic Politics in Southeast Asia*. Routledge, 2002. Pg 34.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, Pg 35.

whole cloth a Burmese identity based on the shared Buddhist heritage of nearly 90% of the country, the Burmese nationalists simultaneously created the conditions necessary for the creation of a non-Buddhist “other” in Burma where one had not so clearly existed before. Prior to the colonial administration no true Burmese identity existed because one could never cohesively be formed. But the introduction of the British state apparatus combined with its logistical ability to bring once disparate regions under the same canopy of administration brought with it a unification that was never realized under the traditional monarchic-*sangha* structure. This logistic ability to unify, coupled with the seeming political necessity of the project as a means to combat colonial influence and the decay of Buddhist morality in the wake of the collapse of the traditional Burmese religious and political structures, created a condition wherein Buddhism took on a new role. The British, in keeping with their Western values, did away with the confluence of religious power and political power evident in the symbiotic relationship of the monarchy and the *sangha*. However, in the process of attempting to weaken Buddhism’s political role they inadvertently raised its cache as a cultural unifier.

### **The Era of Burmese Independence**

But it is a long way from a mere unified culture to the seemingly burgeoning ethnocentric state that we see on display in Myanmar in the early twenty-first century. The next step in this process was the assassination of Aung San in 1947 and the desertion of his ideals in the years that would follow. In 1947 Burma had finally secured its release from colonial restraints, reached through the efforts of the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL) and spearheaded to a large degree by the leadership of Aung San. A member of the radical communistic *Thakin* student organization in his youth and a continued outspoken proponent of socialism, Aung San was sympathetic to liberal notions like the secular state. His made these

views clear in documents like the AFPFL manifesto of 1944, where he wrote that “Freedom of conscience should be established. The State should remain neutral on religious questions.”<sup>29</sup>

Unfortunately for the development of the modern liberal state in Burma, Aung San was assassinated, falling victim to an internecine split with the more radical hardline Communist branch of the AFPFL.<sup>30</sup> Despite his death, the principles of his manifesto were made manifest in the constitution that was ratified a few months after his death. Beyond opening with a section on Rights of Freedom which reads a great deal like the First Amendment rights codified in the Constitution of the United States, the Burmese Constitution of 1947 lays out a series of religious freedoms granted to all Burmese citizens. Here Buddhism is given particular attention, recognizing the “special position of Buddhism as the faith professed by the great majority of the citizens of the Union.”<sup>31</sup> But this is immediately followed by a series of clauses making clear that this special standing is one more of cultural significance than of legal significance. The Burmese Constitution of 1947 continues,

(2) The State also recognizes Islam, Christianity, Hinduism and Animism as some of the religions existing in the Union at the date of the coming into operation of this Constitution.

(3) The State shall not impose any disabilities or make any discrimination on the ground of religious faith or belief.

(4) The abuse of religion for political purposes is forbidden; and any act which is intended or is likely to promote feelings of hatred,

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<sup>29</sup> McCarthy, Stephen. *The Political Theory of Tyranny in Singapore and Burma: Aristotle and the Rhetoric of Benevolent Despotism*. Routledge, 2006. Pg 158.

<sup>30</sup> Charney (2010) introduces the possibility that Aung San’s assassination was not in fact carried out by Burmese political rivals as is typically understood, but perhaps by British authorities. With Burma still under British control at the time, the investigation into Aung San’s death was left to them. Charney describes an “orgy of evidence that too clearly identified [Aung San’s political rival] Saw as the killer,” leading him to speculate that the plot could have been carried out at least in tandem with the British authorities, if not in full. (Pg 70) Though it is unlikely that the British could have rightly expected Aung San’s murder to stem the tide of Burmese independence at this point in the process, it is not out of the realm of possibility that it could have been done as a means of generally punishing the rebellious Burmese by eliminating two of their most high-level rabble rousers, Aung San and U Saw (who was eventually hanged for his role in the plot), in one motion.

<sup>31</sup> The Constitution of the Union of Burma (1947), Section 21.

enmity or discord between racial or religious communities or sects is contrary to this Constitution and may be made punishable by law.<sup>32</sup>

The language here is quite clear. As a matter of law, the constitution of early Burmese independence sought to continue the British policy of the separation of church and state. Though Buddhism has an undoubted cultural significance to the country, the Western values of religious pluralism and liberalism were those which were chosen to be codified into law. When given the choice, there was an explicit decision undertaken by the Burmese framers to abandon the forms and structure of the pre-colonial era in favor of a constitution built on liberal values.

This pluralistic liberal stance was not long-lived or particularly well-founded. Though many of the principles of Aung San's draft of the constitution were carried on in the final ratified version, there were also a number of important changes made. Primary among these were a centralization of power into the government in the capital and a resultant weakening of federal delegation. This alienated a number of the ethnic groups, such as those in the Shan and Karenni states, who were hoping to find in the new constitution a broader sense of self-rule.<sup>33</sup> This served to further fracture identitarian splits at a time when political tensions were already high and exacerbated the violence that was already present in the country. Writing on this period, Michael Charney claims that "It is impossible to understand the Nu years [from the death of Aung San to around 1962], or indeed any period of post-independence Burma without considering the ongoing civil war."<sup>34</sup> This civil war existed on a number of levels. First, there was fracturing within the AFPFL itself, as evidenced most clearly by the assassination of Aung San. The party, with its roots in the radical student movements of past decades, was split among

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Williams, David C. "Constitutionalism before Constitutions: Burma's Struggle to Build A New Order." *Texas Law Review* 87: 1657- 1693. 2009. Pg 1664.

<sup>34</sup> Charney, Pg 73.

the more pragmatic socialist wing of Aung San (who had been willing to work with the Japanese occupying forces during the tail-end of World War II) and the radical communist splinter groups represented by factions like the “Red Flag” Communist Party of Burma. These divisions were not new, and were merely a continuation of tensions which were equally evident before the war. Without the focusing effects of British colonial forces or Japanese occupying forces to galvanize them together, the factions of the Burmese independence movement were finally given space to settle their long-standing internecine disputes.

Equal tensions were brewing outside of the realm of the political elite as well.

Throughout the colonial era, hostilities began to form between various ethnic groups across the country. Prior to the age of colonialism, these various factions considered themselves as separate and autonomous groups who would vie for regional territory and power but were not competing for any particular dominance within a larger Burmese power structure. With the advent of the over-arching British political structure draped over this framework of disparate groups, competition began to form where once there had been no impetus to do so. Combined with the British tendency to divide, classify, and categorize groups that did not view themselves as particularly in need of distinction prior to their new-enforced characterizations, conditions began to form in Burma where competing ethnic identities became the most salient political and social distinction.<sup>35</sup> Much of this was further exacerbated by the British practice of giving different ethnic groups across the country various levels of privilege and allowance. Within Burma there are a number of different ethnic groups, the most prevalent being the eponymous Burmans. Despite their large numbers, this group was not viewed well by the British throughout much of the colonial era. This tension originated from the era of the original pacification of Burma in the

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<sup>35</sup> Wade, Francis. *Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim 'Other'*. Zed Books Ltd, 2017. Pgs 42-43.



late nineteenth century. During this period, the Burmans of the northern region of the country earned a reputation for their anti-Western attitudes, as a number of Buddhist monks there left their monasteries to fight against the British as a means to help preserve their traditional Burmese identity and values.<sup>36</sup> The subsequent years of colonial rule saw the British take retribution against the Burmans through a series of programs designed to keep them as politically powerless as possible despite their large numbers.

Some of these measures were direct, such as the British decision to offer nearly all administrative positions in the Rakhine State to members of the Muslim Rohingya population as a reward for their loyalty, thus detaching the Rakhine ethnic group from political power in their native state<sup>37</sup> or the British tendency to favor Indians because of their reputation as hard workers.<sup>38</sup> But other measures were more indirect, though no less insidious. For example, as would be expected, the British undertook a great deal of missionary work once finally taking over in Burma. The most successful of these efforts was with the Karen people throughout the central part of the country. Though many of these conversions came by way of force, the Baptist missionaries also took over the role of education in these regions of the country, forcing male children to attend regardless of their religious background.<sup>39</sup> This is particularly interesting within the context of Burma, because prior to its British interruption this role of education was duty held exclusively by the Buddhist *sangha*, thus further weakening its already lessened role in colonial Burmese society. The wounds of this action would run deep, as (in a twist which

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<sup>36</sup> It is interesting to note that the justifications used by the typically peace-minded monks to set aside their traditional Buddhist values were nearly identical to the justifications to do the same used by contemporary monks warring against the Rohingya Muslims. According to Mikael Gravers (1996), “the conquest was seen not only as a political and economic subjugation but as a complete destruction of the Burman world order and its religious values, and of Burman cultural identity.” (Pg 303.)

<sup>37</sup> Wade, Pg 82.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., Pg 27.

<sup>39</sup> Gravers, Pg 303.

demonstrates an apparent lack of irony) in 1994 Buddhists in the country would open special schools, referred to Na Ta La school (an acronym for Border Areas National Races Youth Development training schools, and part of a larger national program of the same name designed to regain the strength of Burmese identity from its nadir during the British reign) which would forcefully convert young Christians in the country's Chin and Rakhine states to Buddhism.<sup>40</sup>

It was in the light of the British classifications and the tensions created by their differing treatment that the meaningful expression of "Burmese" identity that controls much of the contemporary condition in Myanmar formed in earnest. In addition to more religiously-based groups such as the aforementioned Young Men's Buddhist Association, the later years of colonial rule saw a shift away from resistance as founded solely on religious grounds to an anti-colonial position premised on nationalist sentiment.<sup>41</sup> This was typified by organizations such as the *Dobama Asiayone* (We, the Burmans), founded in 1933, which exhorted the population to return its focus to Burmese literature, language, and culture as a way to rebel against colonial oppression.<sup>42</sup>

The civil conflicts that plagued the early years of Burmese independence were a result of the past decades of these ethnic divisions, originated by the British and hardened by the reactionary response of the majority Burman population to regain the cultural and political ground it had lost during the colonial regime. The threat of the ethnic divisions to the stability of the newly independent Burmese regime became clear in the middle of 1949 when ethnic rebellions began to break out around the country. The most serious of these was undertaken by the Karen National Defense Organization (KNDO), an organization led primarily by members of

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<sup>40</sup> Wade, Pgs 84-85.

<sup>41</sup> Walton (2018), Pg 24.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., Pg 25.

the Christian Karens but which was comprised primarily of Karen Buddhist practitioners.<sup>43</sup> Working with separatist organizations from other ethnic tribes such as the Mon and the Kachin, the KNDO succeeded in coming close enough to toppling the young administration of U Nu that he was forced to take these threats seriously for the remainder of his time as Prime Minister throughout much of the next decade.<sup>44</sup> These clashes undertaken by various ethnic rebel organization throughout the country would continue on unabated for the next several years, all the while with pressure mounting on Nu to both stem the violence and maintain order in the country.

Nu's eventual response would set the stage for the next several decades of Burmese political development, and ultimately lay the foundations for the contemporary crisis in the Rakhine province. Following the lead of Aung San, upon taking leadership Nu held firm to the principles of the separation of church and state enshrined in the Burmese Constitution of 1947. However, by the early 1950s, with Aung San dead and pressure mounting from the increasingly active Burmese nationalist organizations, U Nu began to enact a change in policy that would move Buddhism in Burma from a position as merely a first among equals to the dominant religion as a matter of law. Michael Charney, in tracing out Nu's evolution on the matter, cites three primary reasons for the change in thinking and policy. The first, and most basic, reason for Nu's willingness to transition from a firmly secular state to a country with Buddhism as its sanctioned state religion was his own personal religiosity, being described at the time as "unique amongst the world's statesmen for his unparalleled piety."<sup>45</sup> The second, more political, reason for his change of heart and policy was the growing power of the monastic lobby in the country at

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<sup>43</sup> Charney, Pg 74.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., Pgs 74-75.

<sup>45</sup> Von Der Mehden, Pg 170.

the time, who had been calling for a change in religious policy since Aung San's introduction of the notion a few years earlier. Though there wasn't widespread public outcry for a change in policy, the monastic community as well as a few other religiously minded organizations in the country succeeded in wagging the dog to a sufficient degree as to keep the issue in the public eye.<sup>46</sup> Finally, Charney attributes Nu's adoption of the policy as a means to help stem the growing forces of communism in Burma. Drawing from Nu's words at the time, it becomes clear that this last explanation is correct, albeit incomplete. Beyond merely serving as a way to bolster the country against the rise of communism that was prevalent throughout Southeast Asia at the time, the adoption of Buddhism as the national religion of Burma had the further benefit of helping to squelch the political strife created by the ethnic divisions of the colonial era. By uniting the vast majority of the country under a banner of Buddhism, at the expense of the much smaller Christian and Muslim populations in the country, Nu believed that he could bring about an effective end to the civil in-fighting (which saw the coming together of groups based primarily on ethnicity regardless of religious principles, such as with the unified Christian and Buddhist Karens) that plagued the early years of Burmese independence. This transition of understanding Burmese identity not as a function of ethnicity (which created a situation of many smaller, as many as 144, individual ethnic groups fighting in opposition to the approximately two-thirds Burman majority) to instead being understood as a function of religion (now creating a situation of agreement between the 90% Buddhist majority) would in Nu's words "go to the root causes of the present disorders in this country" of which "not less than eighty per cent of

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<sup>46</sup> Donald Eugene Smith (2016), in examining public opinion at the time on the matter of secularization versus Buddhism as a state religion finds no evidence that there was a particular public outcry to change the then status quo of secularism. "There was virtually no evidence of dissatisfaction with the 1947 constitutional settlement during the first few years of independence. The government was chiefly occupied with a most fundamental concern- the survival of the state...The question of a state religion, however, was clearly not a matter of pressing public concern." (Pg 232)

them are due to apathy of religion.”<sup>47</sup> Speaking on the topic elsewhere he stated his position that “all activities directed towards the stability of the Union and the perpetuation of Independence are steps towards the propagation of the *Śāsana* [religion].”<sup>48</sup>

Despite his support for the movement, U Nu was not unaware of the difficulties that would be faced in such a transition. Speaking following the conclusion of the Sixth Buddhist Council in 1956, the result of which was a full-throated call by the *sangha* of Burma to move towards enacting Buddhism as a proper state religion, U Nu addressed the participants of the council and listed three difficulties that would have to be reckoned with were the plan to be enacted: “(1) The step might have a serious effect on the unity of the country. (2) It might be used by other countries to disrupt the internal stability of Burma. (3) It might create misunderstanding among the many loyal government servants who were not Buddhist.”<sup>49</sup> While these are very legitimate concerns, one cannot help but be struck by the fact that they are all instrumental and practical in nature, rather than philosophical. Nowhere does U Nu express any concern for the adoption of a Buddhism as a state religion as an act in itself. He does not express any concerns, for example, that to do so would violate the sanctity of the principle of the separation of church and state as given in the Constitution of 1947, merely that to do so may be impractical. Though it would take some time to sort out the necessary practicalities, the wishes of the *sangha* would eventually come to be honored. Following the election of 1960, which was to a great degree run on the question of the proper relationship between Buddhism and the Burmese state, U Nu and his party took a resounding victory and preceded to set the wheels in motion to officially enact Buddhism as the state religion within the first half hour of their first

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<sup>47</sup> Von Der Mehden, Pg 170.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., Pg 170.

<sup>49</sup> Smith (2016), Pg 233.

meeting in office.<sup>50</sup> U Nu and the rest of his Pyidaungsu (Union) Party spent the remainder of 1960 trying to convince the non-Buddhist minorities of the country that any changes in the secular nature of the Burmese state would only serve as exaltations of Buddhism and not as attempts to marginalize other communities, an argument which was met with incredulity and opposition by nearly every non-Buddhist ethnic minority in the country.<sup>51</sup> After agreeing to implement safeguards to ensure that non-Buddhists would not become second class citizens in the Burma, the necessary legislation to make the change official was finally passed by a large margin in 1961 by the overwhelmingly Buddhist Nu government, despite the continued protest of the state's minority populations.

In addition to the State Religion Promotion Bill, which provided for things such as the mandatory education of Buddhist principles to Buddhist school students by the *sangha* (thus firmly returning the role of education into the purview of the religious sphere) and several Buddhist blue laws, amendments were made to the sections of the Constitution of 1947 regarding religious freedom. Gone was the language that painted Buddhism merely as holding a special place in Burmese history and culture, replaced instead with explicit language declaring Buddhism, on the basis of its majoritarian standing, to be the state religion. However, as a matter of Buddhist political theory, it is the extra additions to the constitution that are of particular interest. Described by Smith as employing “precise Pāli terminology,”<sup>52</sup> an entire new subsection was added to the constitutional provisions regarding religion. These additions are as follows:

Buddhism being the State religion of the Union, the Union Government shall—

(a) promote and maintain Buddhism for its welfare and advancement in its three

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., Pg 243.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., Pg 246.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., Pg 253.

aspects, namely, *pariyatti śāsana* (study of the Teachings of the Buddha), *patipatti śāsana* (practice of the Teachings), and *pativedha śāsana* (enlightenment);

(b) honour the Tiratana [The Three Jewels of Buddhist practice], namely, the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha;

(c) protect the said religion in its three aspects and the Tiratana from all dangers including insult and false representation, made by words, either spoken or written, or by other means.<sup>53</sup>

These principles lay out a general stance on the purpose of government, namely that because Buddhism is now recognized as the state religion the state has a duty not only to promote Buddhist principles but also Buddhist practice and the necessary religious periphery, such as the *sangha*, as well. This begins to sound decidedly familiar from within the historical tradition of Buddhist political thought. The familiarity increases if one looks at the remainder of the additions to the document. Beyond simply promoting Buddhist principles, the government is now also tasked with restoring and maintaining the country's Buddhist pagodas, convening annual meetings with high level members of the *sangha*, and providing hospitals and medical care for all monks throughout the country. These roles now mandated to be undertaken by the state align almost exactly with the duties undertaken by past kings in the traditional period of Burmese history in their relationship with the *sangha*. With the amendments to the Constitution of 1947, the Burmese government reinstated, in as close to a degree as possible within its contemporary setting, the relationship of obligation between political power and the country's Buddhist constituency.<sup>54</sup> Seeking to find peace from civil strife, U Nu and his government attempted to harness the calming effects of a shared Buddhist identity. On one level this attempt

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<sup>53</sup> Smith (2016), Appendix I.

<sup>54</sup> The one element not included, which was left out as a means to ensure religious minorities that the government was not fully stacked against them, was a mandate that the head of state or any high-level government officials be required to be Buddhist themselves. (Smith, Pg 256) However, given the demographics in play, it can't help but seem that this was a relatively minor concession that would have very little practical effect as a matter of course.

was made with the goal of trying to unite the Burmese population around their largely shared Buddhist heritage, at the expense of traditional ethnic divides. But with the changes made to the Constitution in making Buddhism the formal state religion, U Nu's government also reestablished the connections between church and state that had once defined Burmese political life but had been severed by the British colonial authorities. The result was not simply a more unified populace, but a government that would once again be imbued with the authority and legitimacy conveyed to it by way of its relationship with the *sangha*. In this regard, Nu's movement away from the secularism of Aung San was not simply a practical political stratagem but an attempt to create progress from a return to ancient Buddhist political theory.

Philosophically, this transition represented a sea change in Burmese political strategy but as a practical matter it was essentially all for naught. As short-lived as the pluralistic era of Aung San's secularism was within the grand scope of Burmese history, U Nu's era of a contemporary return to ancient Buddhist principles was even shorter. The growing influence of Buddhism during the Nu years was mirrored by another growing power, initially meant to ensure its protection. For the decade of his rule prior to his conversion of Burma to Buddhist state, Nu and his government were plagued by ethnic unrest and civil strife. Prior to his solution of a civil Buddhist conversion, Nu seemingly sole recourse to retain some modicum of order was through the employment of force via the Burmese military. Tasked with such an essential role, elements within the military spent the preceding years building on their newly conferred power and strengthening the extent of their influence.<sup>55</sup> Only a few months after the constitutional reforms, in March of 1962, a military coup led by General Ne Win disposed the civilian government replacing it with the Revolutionary Council, led by Ne Win himself.

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<sup>55</sup> Charney, Pg 90.



Policy under the military government saw a series of quick changes. One of the key issues facing Ne Win was the continued difficulty of factious divisions throughout the country, left unresolved despite the attempts of the civilian Nu government. The government of the Revolutionary Council continued to try and tamp down these divisions. Attempts to end ethnic discord during the Nu years were undertaken as a means to create a working cultural and political bloc of Buddhist practitioners at the expense of ethnic pluralism. The military junta, seeking to accomplish the same goal, took a decidedly less nuanced approach, attempting to relegate the force of the ethnic divisions by way of removing their political power directly, shutting down the various ethnic councils which lead the relatively ethnically homogenous states within the country.<sup>56</sup> The attempt here was to create unity not through a reconfiguring of cultural identity, but through sheer force. To this end, the Nu era policies of promoting Buddhism as a state religion and cultural touchstone were reversed and the Revolutionary Council promoted a policy of religious indifference.<sup>57</sup> As expressed in coup's declaration, *The Burmese Way to Socialism*, "Though race, religion and language are important factors it is only their traditional desire and will to live in unity through weal and woe that binds a people together and makes them a nation and their spirit a patriotism."<sup>58</sup> It is unclear exactly what "traditional desire" to live in unity the document is describing in relation to the various ethnic sects of Burma, but the next several decades of Burmese political history indicate that the government was quite proficient in creating the necessary woe.

Despite the intentions of the Revolutionary Council to divorce Buddhist practice from its government, it nonetheless sought to remain thoroughly Burmese in its outlook and presentation,

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., Pg 108.

<sup>57</sup> Tin Maung Maung Than. "The 'Sangha' and 'Sasana' in Socialist Burma." *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 3: 26-61. 1988. Pg 28.

<sup>58</sup> Silverstein, Josef. *Burmese Politics: The Dilemma of National Unity*. Rutgers University Press, 1980. Pg 230.

and thus allowed a certain Buddhist influence to seep through. The policies of the socialist government, though decidedly socialist in their impetus, belied a Buddhist foundation. Ne Win, in speaking of the commitments of his government made clear that the attempts to embrace a socialist lifestyle were in part necessitated by “anxieties over food, security, clothing, and shelter.” Equally, the causes of the revolution were couched in the language of the necessity of a morally upright government.<sup>59</sup> Both the goal of basic social security and the view of government as intrinsically tied to the protection of morality clearly echo the political theory of the ancient Pāli texts, particularly the *Aggañña* and *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Suttas*. Drawing a further parallel to the history of Burma, the Council also took over the role of education, a duty historically placed in the hands of the *sangha* throughout Burma’s history.<sup>60</sup>

The goals of the Ne Win government, as well as the stated justification for fulfilling these duties, were both approached from a very Buddhist perspective and framed in Buddhist terms, even if this was not the regime’s direct intention. Their means for accomplishing these goals however were undertaken in a decidedly secular fashion. Much of the junta’s political strategy was tied into a promotion of participation in the political process, attempting to unify through a shared connection to the central authority.<sup>61</sup> This approach is odd within the framework of Buddhist politics, though it should be noted that the Burmese approach to political participation is itself odd within the same scope. Traditional Buddhist political theory, mostly clearly the *Aggañña Sutta*, maintains that political participation (at least in the active and direct form as it is understood in the West) is something that should likely be avoided whenever possible. To act politically, concerned with mundane affairs, is detrimental to one’s *kamma*. As such, political

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<sup>59</sup> Charney, Pg 109.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., Pg 117.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., Pg 109.

participation has typically been presented as being limited to elite political actors, in particular Buddhist kings, who have already accrued a great deal of *kamma* (as evidenced by their high position) and are willing and able to bear the weight of the duty of political action. For centuries this served as a primary justification for the rule of the Buddhist monarchs. They were the ones tasked with shouldering the burden of the necessary evil of political life, relieving their subjects of the hardship. However, in his detailed section on the history of political participation in Burmese political thought, Matthew Walton makes clear that the political history of Burma blurs the otherwise clear edges of the concept. Despite the fact that no proper word for the Western notion of “political participation” exists within the Burmese language, Burmese political practice in the modern era has shown an attempt to bring Buddhist practice in the political sphere.<sup>62</sup> Many of the early examples of this participation are found in the aforementioned Buddhist social groups of the early twentieth century, such as the YMBA. Within this context, the push of the socialist junta in favor of political participation makes more sense, as it was meant to accomplish the same goal of uniting people around a common cause. Yet despite its rhetoric of political participation, the government of the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) created a sphere of political action that was decidedly limited, confined only to groups and organizations that were deemed acceptable to the government. Nonetheless, contrary to traditional Buddhist political values and practices, the military government sought to bring order through a shared stake in the centralized power, albeit held at the wrong end of a gun. It has only been in recent years of Burmese political history that notions of political participation such as voting, office holding, and direct political action have expanded to take on any meaningful form. Direct

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<sup>62</sup> Walton (2018), Pg 127. Though he goes on to note that, much like his work on the concept of rights within Buddhist thought, his project entails the attempt to find workable cognates (both conceptually and practically) from within the Buddhist tradition even if we lack indigenous terms.

political actions of monks, which has now unfortunately begun to metastasize into a religio-political movement against the Muslim Rohingya, was itself instrumental to the success of the “Saffron Revolution” which fueled the transition to civilian control and democracy in Myanmar in 2007 and 2008. Though very nascent, these movements towards an appreciation of the duties of self-rule are a bright spot in what has been an otherwise very rocky movement towards democracy in the country. However, these successes must nevertheless be understood within the context of their novelty within the grander scope of Burmese Buddhist political theory and history.

The BSPP, despite their attempts at secularization, eventually came to realize that their efforts to create a government capable of standing on its own terms, through such programs as the mandatory participation in state institutions, was an impossible project within the Burmese context. To this end, embracing the logic if not the spirit and piety of U Nu’s similar gambit several years prior, the BSPP sought (as is Buddhist tradition) to legitimize its government through a closer connection with the *sangha*. But yet again, as with the examples above, though the tactics of the BSPP were similar to that of ancient Buddhist political practice, its means of actualizing those goal were not. The most blatant attempt to extract legitimacy from a connection with the *sangha* came in 1980 when Ne Win created the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee. This group, handpicked by the Ne Win government, would serve as a board to oversee and govern the activity of the broader *sangha* throughout Burma.<sup>63</sup> The creation of the committee served two key purposes. Beyond the legitimacy brought onto the Ne Win government through its close association with the *sangha*, it also brought one of Ne Win’s largest political liabilities directly under his control. Though the provisions of the organization’s rules were framed in

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<sup>63</sup> Wade, Pg 88.

terms of ensuring the purity of Buddhist practice in the country and of the monks of the *sangha*, in practice the rules also had the effect of silencing any dissent by the members of the *sangha* against the Ne Win government as political participation by members of the *sangha* was prohibited at the threat of disrobement.<sup>64</sup>

Though it succeeded in maintaining itself for several decades, the rule of the socialist military junta in Burma was never able to fully stitch together the divisions that equally plagued its predecessors. A new constitution in 1974 introduced at least a façade of civilian control (though the BSPP remained the only party and Ne Win served as President).<sup>65</sup> This governmental reformulation brought with it another concerted effort to negate the effects of the country's ethnic divisions, divorcing them from their local power by mandating that ethnic groups were no longer in control in the country's states and moving towards a unitary system.<sup>66</sup> The power of the military junta began to wane in the late 1980s, coinciding with the fall of the Soviet Union and the weakening of Communist influence worldwide generally. Renamed Myanmar by the military junta following a series of uprisings in 1989, the country began a slow and short-lived movement towards democratization, coinciding with the rise in standing of Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of Aung San, as a political dissident for her outspoken support for self-rule. These gains were cut short by the rise of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), later renamed the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), in the 1990s. Replacing the BSPP in 1988, the SLORC moved away from the socialist values of the BSPP, but

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<sup>64</sup> Tin Maung Maung Than, Pg 40.

<sup>65</sup> On matters of religion, this constitution (at least nominally) set forth a policy of religious tolerance. Citizens are explicitly granted the freedom to exercise the religion of their choice, and are protected from religious discrimination as a matter of law. Most importantly, Article 156 asserts that "Religion and religious organisations shall not be used for political purposes. Laws shall be enacted to this effect." (The Constitution of the Union of Burma, 1974) However, in practice, the laws enacted to this effect did more to ensure that religion would only be used to further the desired ends of the military regime, rather than be removed from political life simply.

<sup>66</sup> Silverstein, Pg 241.

retained its military power and its penchant for human rights abuse.<sup>67</sup> The politics of Myanmar remained fundamentally unchanged throughout the 1990s and into the mid-2000s. Then, unexpectedly, in 2008 a new constitution (the country had been without one since the late 1980s) was introduced by the military government. Though many were suspicious that the reasonably democratic constitution was just a means for the heavily criticized military government to remain in power by avoiding a proper revolution, the changes precipitated by constitution of 2008 nevertheless introduced long-forgotten elements such as multiple parties back into the Burmese political sphere.<sup>68</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi was released from her widely-criticized house arrest in 2010, and her National League for Democracy party won commandingly in the elections of 2012, though the military still retains 25% of the seats as a matter of law. Though the situation is far from perfect, Myanmar has undoubtedly entered an era of democracy. What remains less clear, however, is how the political life this democracy creates will manifest itself.

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<sup>67</sup> Leifer, Michael. *Dictionary of the Modern Politics of South-East Asia*. Routledge, 1996. Pg 240.

<sup>68</sup> A definitive answer as to why the military government willingly chose to cede some power with a new democratically-minded constitution remains a mystery, as the actors responsible for the change have remained quiet on the issue even a decade later. Most serious speculation places their intentions as a means to retain power (albeit it decreased) and maintain political legitimacy among the international community in a time of increasing scrutiny on repressive regimes. There were also likely economic components to the decision as well. The military spent its previous decades of rule creating an economy defined by kleptocracy and government intervention into economic affairs for the benefits of the ruling elite. (Tucker, 2001) Since the initial stirrings of democratization that began in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the government had come to realize that political liberalization would help lead to further economic liberalization, which would come to most clearly benefit themselves due to the groundwork laid by their intertwining of the country's economic concerns to their own personal benefit. (Perry, Pgs 156-158) In this regard, it is important to note that the new constitution of 2008 did not strip the military of its power completely, leaving it with a 25% stake of control, couched by the rhetoric of the military reformers as a move to "discipline-flourishing democracy." This would enable the forces of the old guard to maintain enough control to ensure that their own interests were protected, but has proven to be not enough standing to have them held to account for any problems which would arise, as evidenced by the majority of the blame of the Rohingya crisis being shouldered by Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy party.

## Conclusion

Though the direct political ramifications are evident in the last sixty years of Burmese history, the long-term effects of the destruction of the monarchic-*sangha* structure by the British are only now starting to come to full fruition in the identitarian clashes throughout contemporary Myanmar, punctuated by the violence of the Rohingya crisis. The attempts by the British to impose Western understandings of the separation of church and state in the early years of the colonial era caused a backlash among the Buddhist Burman majority of the era, culminating in an exaggerated emphasis on the role of identity in Burmese culture and a concerted political movement of Burmese nationalism which slowly morphed into an identitarian movement based on the widely shared facet of Buddhist heritage and practice. Though these strengthened political bonds served as a useful (if not arguably necessary) means to help finally rid the Burmese of their colonial occupiers, the unintended consequence of this hyper-attentiveness to identity was the alienation (and now culminating in seeming dehumanization) of those groups in the country which rested outside this identity.

Modern Myanmar has been forced to deal with the realities of heterogeneous society. The conditions for this current conflict were created by the efforts of the British to impose the structures of a modern, liberal state onto a condition which lacked the grounding necessary to support these structures. The result was a conflict based on ethnic identities that themselves were also seemingly constructed by the British. In the name of seeking order, this conflict was escalated through the British creation of a centralized state apparatus along with the logistical mechanisms necessary to allow the conflict to flourish, and then furthered by breaking down the traditional monarchic-*sangha* structure which had once held these competing forces at bay. But this later project, the separation of the Buddhist *sangha* from its traditional relationship with the

Burmese government by the British, was not simply a means to bring order but equally a reflection of the liberal principles of political secularism. An attempt was made to continue on within this Western liberal framework, even after the colonial era, when these principles were initially accepted by the Burmese in their Constitution of 1947, which codified the separation as a matter of law. But the age of secularism was short-lived in Burma and the political eras which followed saw each successive government seeking to harness the powers of the Burmese Buddhist community to its own ends. In this regard, even in the modern era, Burma has never fully abandoned a large and meaningful part of its ancient political order. Though its form has taken many shapes, the role of the *sangha* as a political force in its own right (albeit a largely indirect one) has remained a mostly steady component of Burmese political history. Even when governments such as the military junta of Ne Win sought to debilitate the power of Buddhism as a political agent, the project was ultimately deemed a failure and Buddhism was subsequently coopted again as a political tool to their own ends rather than debased. For nearly a millennium, Burmese politics has been Buddhist politics, and the last several decades of Burmese political history, which has only further served to ingrain the importance of Buddhist identity to the Burmese character, indicate this condition isn't likely to change in the near future.

### **Democracy in Myanmar**

The era of democracy appeared to be burgeoning following Burma's release from colonial bondage at the end of World War II. The country experienced almost a decade and a half of democratic development following the adoption of the Constitution of 1947 until the military takeover in 1962. This short span, long enough to suffer through the transitional growing pains of a country beginning its first democratic experiment but not long enough to actually make the meaningful political and cultural adjustments necessary to complete such a daunting



transition, was the last of self-rule that the citizens of Burma would see until the unexpected reversal by the SPDC to draft a new constitution which would allow for some meaningful democratic reforms in the late-2000s. In this regard, when Myanmar began the process of democratization in 2008 it was as though it was beginning the democratic project wholly anew. This was not a proper return to democracy but another stab at finally achieving it.

Despite the intervening decades, the divides that plagued that first Burmese attempt at democracy are still present and in some ways return renewed and respirited following the era of military control. While the military regime was not able succeed in its project of wiping Myanmar clean from ethnic division, it did serve the unintended consequence of at least lessening outright ethnic clashes by way of providing a common threat, behaving better towards some groups than others but ultimately serving the interests of no one but the ruling elites.<sup>69</sup> This leaves the nascent democratic movement in Myanmar in an odd position. The unifying force of a Buddhist bloc, needed to hold the country together through the perils of colonialism and military despotism, is now no longer a mere cultural force but a political force in its own right. This is a grand development for the roughly 90% of the country that are Buddhist practitioners. But as the last several years of conflict in the Rakhine state between Buddhists and Muslims has demonstrated, an unrefined democracy is a less appealing option for those in the minority. The question going forward for the democratic movement of Myanmar is how it will choose to respond to nearly a century of baked-in Buddhist political nationalism now that it must confront head-on the realities of a pluralistic society. Buddhism as it stands, not merely as a matter of history but as a matter of political culture, has become inseparable from Burmese political life. The pull of Buddhism in Myanmar is so great that even a regime like that of Ne

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<sup>69</sup> Slater, Dan. *Ordering Power: Contentious Politics and Authoritarian Leviathans in Southeast Asia*. Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pg 13.

Win, which sought initially to rule apart from the forces of Buddhism, was ultimately forced to couch its language in Buddhist terms and to co-opt the *sangha* to provide it with legitimacy. Can we rightly expect that this relationship will dissolve in the democratic era, and if not, should the international community be comfortable with the prospects of a state governed by a highly homogenous religious population with no concern (formal or informal) for a separation of religious influence and the state and with no apparent safeguards for the protection of religious minorities within the country? What will be the standing of rights in this condition?

Democracy is not a natural fit, historically or politically, for traditionally Buddhist countries like Myanmar. The Buddhist political tradition shows little favor for self-rule outside of the bounds of the structured *sangha* religious communities. Political action throughout the texts of the early Buddhist tradition and throughout the history of Buddhist political practice has been understood as a dirty activity, one that though occasionally necessary should be avoided whenever possible at the risk incurring detriment to the further of the one's enlightenment. The result of this understanding has been a historical coalescing and concentration of power into the hands of a small political elite, traditionally a Buddhist king who is understood as having such an excess of *kamma* that he is capable of withstanding the deleterious effects of political action. In this regard, not only are the forms and structures of a society based on democracy novel to the Buddhist world but the very mindset underlying self-rule is as well. The project of Burmese democracy then is not one solely of institutions but of political philosophy. In the absence of the liberal philosophic grounding upon which modern Western democracy was built, upon what idea will the democracy of Myanmar be founded?

In his wide-ranging study of Burmese political thought, Matthew J. Walton works to answer this question by examining the presentation of democratic ideas within Myanmar. He

opens his dissection of Burmese democracy with a quote from Burmese monk Ashin Eindaga, “Democracy means acting in accordance with *taya* [justice, law, truth, *dhamma* (the teachings of the Buddha)].<sup>70</sup> From this short quote we can draw the fundamental elements of the Burmese understanding of democracy. Even simply from the Burmese concept of *taya*, which Walton translates as encompassing not only ideas comparable to the Western political notion of justice but also of the broad totality of the Buddha’s teachings, we can see the fundamental conflation of the political and the spiritual within the Burmese presentation of political life. *Dhamma* (the Truth of Buddhist teachings) and justice are synonymous concepts. When taken and applied to the context of a democratic political order, if democracy is understood as a means to create a just society then from within the Burmese understanding it must equally be harnessed to create a society which aligns with Buddhist principles.

To this end, Walton approaches the subject of democracy in Myanmar from the perspective of a division of two separate presentations of democracy, rights-based democracy and moral democracy.<sup>71</sup> Rights-based democracy, the less common justification for democratic thought in Burma, is primarily an attempt to restructure and reconfigure the Western presentation of democracy in terms that are meaningful within the Burmese political context. Given

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<sup>70</sup> Walton (2018), Pg 163.

<sup>71</sup> For its part, during the period of democratic transition the military leadership has put forth a third understanding of democracy, referred to as “discipline-flourishing democracy.” Meant as an alternative to what they understand as the anarchic organization of democracy in the West, this presentation of democracy (put forth to a large degree in state-owned media) emphasizes the necessity of staid and measured progress in the process of democratization, with the military forces regulating the forces of disorder. Though it seems reasonably clear that this approach is primarily meant as a means to ensure that the military powers in the country can retain at least a modicum of their former standing, from the perspective of political theory it is interesting to note that a great deal of the military’s rhetoric in favor of discipline-flourishing democracy is premised on the notion that much of the Burmese citizenry is simply not morally equipped or ready for the necessities of political participation. (Walton 2018, Pgs 168-171) In this regard, though undemocratic in approach, the assumptions underlying the arguments for discipline-flourishing democracy actually align much more closely with traditional Buddhist presentations of the connection between morality and political life than the other contemporary arguments for democracy in the country. In this presentation, the military has seemingly placed itself into the traditional role of the Buddhist king, a force to help guide political life and maintain order. Compare this to the presentation of Burmese moral democracy below, which does not deny the importance of a guiding moral force but seeks to democratize this role across the will of the citizenry.

Buddhism's rejection of the Western conception of the individual, effort must be made to find a new ground for the respect of the individual which underlies the argument in favor for democratic rule in Western political thought. This attempt is well characterized by Hti La Aung, who writes that "Without exception, democracy includes people's dignity, people's worth, and purity of mind/spirit, things that are all included under the teachings of the Buddha."<sup>72</sup>

While Hti La Aung is accurate in attributing these ideas to both Western democratic thought and the teachings of the Buddha, there is an unstated assumption here that a mere overlap in categories is sufficient to serve as a grounding for a political order. Simply discovering a shared respect for certain basic principles does not mean that the foundations upon which these principles are respected are compatible, let alone that the definitional understandings of these principles are also shared. For example, looking at the idea of human dignity, what this conception entails within the liberal tradition (the allowance for a space to freely practice human activity without the fear of violence) does not necessarily align with its possible meanings within the Buddhist tradition (wherein the respect for human dignity could likely entail the attempt to shape human action to align with Buddhist principles in order to create a condition of freedom higher than that available in the mundane, political realm). The attempt to ground a Buddhist understanding of a rights-based democracy not own its own terms but by finding philosophic cognates and alignment to the concepts which ground Western democracy inherently runs the risk of creating an unwieldy political anachronism.

This issue is corrected by the second presentation of Burmese democracy, moral democracy, which attempts to explicitly ground a justification of democracy on Buddhist teachings. Walton frames this presentation by examining the foundations of political theory in

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<sup>72</sup> Walton (2018), Pg 175 (translated from Burmese by Walton).

Myanmar. Though the foundations of any political order are necessarily complicated, he traces out one primary theme that underlies the tradition of Burmese Buddhist political thought, the idea of unity. On this point, Walton is echoed by Philip Eldridge, who in his discussion of the relationship between democracy and the cultural values of Southeast Asia emphasizes the key Eastern principle of the priority of the community over the individual.<sup>73</sup> Though the notion of communitarianism is neither foreign nor incompatible with the Western presentation of democracy, Eldridge goes on to trace the particularities of this Asian understanding of community and unity. Discussing the nature of Asian democracy, he writes that

In ideal-type terms, Asian democracy paradigms propose an antithesis between values of state, authority, national unity, community, stability, development and harmony as against individualism egoism, hedonism, legalism, and anarchy... In practice, Asian political systems mix many combinations of democratic and non-democratic elements. New terms such as 'illiberal' and 'semi' democracy attempt to grapple with this reality.<sup>74</sup>

But what particularly draws this conception of unity (and its differences from comparable Western understandings) into focus is the not end to which these notions are applied, but the means through which they are achieved. "Both western and Asian democracies confront the reality of plural societies with competing moral, social, and political outlooks," he writes. "Accommodating minorities poses a challenge to principles of democratic majoritarianism in both. While liberal-democracies tend to favour constitutional or legislative safeguards for minority rights, East Asian states tend to manipulate their society's diversity to impose their own models of harmony and national integration."<sup>75</sup> Walton helps to clarify what "manipulating a society's diversity" precisely entails when he writes of the Burmese conception of unity that

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<sup>73</sup> Eldridge, Philip J. *The Politics of Human Rights in Southeast Asia*. Routledge, 2002. Pg 33.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, Pg 37.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

At its root, this perspective on unity requires subsuming one's own interests for the benefit of the whole, something that encapsulates the Buddhist practice of rejecting *atta* (ego). Correct moral practice on the Buddhist path begins with the recognition that *doukka* (dissatisfactoriness) originates from ignorance of the fundamental characteristics of *anatta* (no self/control) and develops into desire focused on fulfilling one's own misguided cravings. Disunity is the result of a group of individuals committed only to their own benefit; it is a result of moral failure.<sup>76</sup>

Framed in these terms, Walton's description of the origin of societal disunity quite closely mirrors that of Publius's presentation of faction in the *Federalist*. In both, a danger is presented by the selfish actions of individuals, each seeking their own private benefit. But what is most interesting in this comparison, and what most clearly illuminates the differences between the approaches of Western and Buddhist democratic theory, is how this condition is addressed. As Eldridge points out above, and as it discussed at length by Publius, the approach of Western liberal democracy is to attempt to counteract the deficiencies of man through constitutional and institutional means. The reason for this approach is not simply one of expediency, but of a realization of Western modern political thought. Flowing from the thought of Hobbes, and in an explicit rejection of the thought of the Ancients, Publius understands these deficiencies in man to be both natural and unchangeable, they are sown into the nature of man. Publius argues that man's selfishness must be constrained by constitutional means not because no attempts had ever been made to construct a political theory wherein man's nature could be reshaped, but because these theories are fundamentally incompatible with liberty. Society could be constructed in such a way that all men are given "the same opinions, the same passions, and the same interests" but to do so Publius claims would be impracticable, at least if we are to maintain a free society.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Walton (2018), Pg 187.

<sup>77</sup> Hamilton, Alexander, John Jay, and James Madison. *The Federalist*. George Carey and James McClellan eds. Liberty Fund, 2001. Pg 43.

It is on this point that Publius and the political theory of Burmese Buddhism (and traditional Buddhist political theory generally) most clearly differ. Publius, in describing the project as impracticable, does not do so on the grounds that it would be impossible to construct a state or society so powerful as to be able to accomplish this end, but instead on the notion that this condition originates in the connection between man's "reason and his self-love."<sup>78</sup> Publius's understanding then is premised not solely on Western political theory, but on Western epistemology as well. Man is a creature defined by thought, and the nature of his thought is such that it directs him towards selfish ends. The Burmese Buddhist political project, by equating the necessity of unity with the possibility of not only democracy but of *taya* broadly understood, removes from it the necessity inherent in liberal Western thought to give privilege to man's reasoned self-interest. The Buddhist rejection of the individual, not solely as a political unit but as a meaningful epistemological concept, removes from it the necessity to view the project as impracticable. Not only is it not viewed as impracticable, the achievement of this end is the very goal of the Buddhist political project itself.

Publius writes in *Federalist 51* that "Justice is the end of government. It is the end of civil society."<sup>79</sup> This statement does not differ in form in its comparable Burmese Buddhist presentation, but it does differ in content, reconfigured to claim that *taya* is the end of government and civil society. But this difference is not merely one of substituting one conception of justice for another. The justice of the Western liberal tradition is one which equates justice with free human choice and action. The *taya* of Burmese political life is inherently intertwined with the teachings of the Buddha, made so at the expense of individual concerns. As such, a civil society made to align with these principles must itself necessarily be

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., Pg 271.

made to align with Buddhist principles. From this perspective, to create a society premised on unrestrained free choice is a dereliction of duty. Publius opines in *Federalist 51* that if men were angels, no government would be necessary. From the Buddhist perspective, it would seem to hold equally true that if all men were enlightened, no government would be necessary. The difference between these two sentiments is that while Publius' observation is meant to be read as a statement of a sad impossibility, that of the Buddhists is understood as a practicable political goal. The very nature of Buddhist claims are premised on the notion of a malleable human nature. Its standing as a soteriological project places it on a different plane than that of Publius, who molds his government to fit man's nature rather than the other way around.

Walton's biggest concern, both here and in other writings, is to try and find a way to make democracy fit philosophically within the scope of Burmese political history and culture. Solely to this end he likely succeeds. But the greater issue, left largely ignored by Walton and most other commenters on the transition of historically Buddhist countries into the sphere of modern Western political life, is that democracy itself is not the political or philosophic end of modern Western political thought but rather a practical result of it. The democratic revolutions of early Western modernity were not spontaneous, but rather were a manifestation of the political theory of the liberal thought which preceded them. To this end, the political history of Western modernity is not one of democracy simply, but rather of liberal democracy, a politics of self-rule premised on the notion that all individuals are entitled to an equal share of sovereignty precisely because of their standing as equal individuals. Walton's assumption, largely unstated, is that any solid justification of democracy (on whatever terms are necessary) in Myanmar should be and is sufficient for Myanmar to slot into and coexist with the political sphere of the West.



We see this stance echoed in an interesting way in the political action of Aung San Suu Kyi in her own work to help Myanmar in both its transition to democracy and its transition into the political sphere of the West. For nearly thirty years Aung San Suu Kyi has been held up, both in Myanmar and within the global community generally, as an outspoken proponent of democracy and human rights in a country whose government seemingly had very little respect for either. Her bona fides as a proponent of democracy in the West require no more confirmation than her receipt of a Noble Peace Prize in 1991 for her work towards political liberty in Myanmar. But what is less obvious to Western observers, masked by her political tact and years of Western education, is the extent to which Aung San Suu Kyi's rhetoric in favor of democracy has been laden with Buddhist language and political conceptions. That a Burmese politician would speak to Burmese citizens using Burmese conceptions of political life is not surprising. But when attempting to understand the possibility of a transition of Myanmar into the sphere of Western political life it should equally not be ignored.

Walton addresses this tension in Aung San Suu Kyi's thought by describing her conception democracy as a "hybrid democratic thought." By this he means that Aung San Suu Kyi has been able to very successfully code-switch between the two spheres of political life she has found herself in as a Western educated Noble Laureate who is also the daughter of arguably the most famous political leader in her country's modern history and a political leader in that country in her own right. More than anyone in contemporary Buddhist politics, Aung San Suu Kyi embodies the tension of the transition of historically Buddhist countries into the modern Western world.

She has managed to bridge this divide by employing various philosophic defenses for her belief in democracy, to the point that Walton feels compelled to make clear that her varying

presentation and conceptions should not be understood as simple inconsistency. Instead, he argues, Aung San Suu Kyi defenses of democracy are a pragmatic attempt to “deploy different conceptions of democracy depending on context.”<sup>80</sup> The most clear of these varying contexts is a need by the multi-cultural Aung San Suu Kyi to be able to both sell the value of democracy to her native country in terms that they will find meaningful and compelling while also successfully expressing the plight of Myanmar to those in the West, who premise their interest on wholly different concerns. In this regard, though Aung San Suu Kyi’s approach may be emblematic of the problematic nature of the Buddhist political transition, it is also equally well-intentioned and likely necessary.

Within the Western context, Aung San Suu Kyi frames her presentation of democracy “in a way that is consistent with Western liberal democracy,” emphasizing “human rights, free and fair elections, and a number of other prominent freedoms.”<sup>81</sup> However, within the Buddhist context Aung San Suu Kyi premises her defense of democracy on Buddhist notions such as unity and the connection between moral purity and good government.<sup>82</sup> She also, like many Buddhist political leaders before her, draws on the political theory of the Pāli Canon to help justify her political claims. For example, in her famous book of essays entitled *Freedom from Fear*, Aung San Suu Kyi ruminates on the nature of democracy and how she wishes to see these principles applied in her country. However, in an essay explicitly on the nature of democracy, Aung San Suu Kyi spends a significant amount of time discussing the traditional Burmese understanding of kingship, and in particular the Ten Duties of the King. As presented by Aung San Suu Kyi, these duties are as follows: liberality, morality, self-sacrifice, integrity, kindness, austerity, non-anger,

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<sup>80</sup> Walton (2018), Pg 181.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., Pgs 181-182.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., Pgs 182-183.

non-violence, forbearance, and non-opposition (which she understands, without particular justification, as referring to non-opposition to the will of the people).<sup>83</sup>

In her point-by-point discussion of these traditional duties, Aung San Suu Kyi makes clear that her understanding of these principles is not tethered to their historical understandings at the expense of modern applicability. Most strikingly, with no particular effort to bridge the obvious gap between the standing of these Ten Duties as moral rules governing the standing of a king, Aung San Suu Kyi claims in summation that

By invoking the Ten Duties of Kings the Burmese are not so much indulging in wishful thinking as drawing on time-honoured values to reinforce the validity of the political reforms they consider necessary. It is a strong argument for democracy that government regulated by principles of accountability, respect for public opinion and the supremacy of just laws are more likely than an all-powerful ruler or ruling class, uninhibited by the need to honour the will of the people, to observe the traditional duties of Buddhist kingship. Traditional values serve both to justify and to decipher popular expectations of democratic government.<sup>84</sup>

In his passage we can see with clarity the philosophic strategy employed by Aung San Suu Kyi in her attempt to dance between the two worlds of Western and Buddhist political thought. In her project of defending democracy on the terms of Burmese Buddhist practice, Aung San Suu Kyi works to blur the distinction between the content of traditional Burmese Buddhist political thought and the historical and political context in which that thought was employed. Rather than abandoning traditional Buddhist political thought in favor of a Western defense of democracy, Aung San Suu Kyi attempts to ground Burmese democracy within the teachings of ancient Burmese practice.

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<sup>83</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi (1991), Pg 170.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., Pg 173.

What Aung San Suu Kyi does not do, however, at least beyond her reimagining of each duty of the king in light of its relationship to and effect on the people at large, is give an adequate justification for the movement from kingship to democracy itself. She speaks highly of the value of the Ten Duties of Kings as a guide to political action, but ignores the obvious reality that these are not duties incumbent on the Buddhist voter or even duties binding the Buddhist political actor broadly construed, but explicitly are duties to govern the action of a Buddhist king. She wishes to maintain an allegiance to traditional values, while simultaneously thoroughly redefining the fundamental nature of these same values.

In this regard, Aung San Suu Kyi's strategy of attempting to ground modern Burmese democratic practice on the terms of traditional Burmese political practice is emblematic of the difficulties of the larger project of integrating traditionally Buddhist countries into the sphere of Western political life. Aung San Suu Kyi, as well positioned as any single person to understand the requirements of both Buddhist political thought and Western political thought, is herself forced to resort to a justification for democracy on wholly Buddhist grounds, no matter how weak or strained this defense may be. Rather than drawing from the canon of Western thought such as Thomas Jefferson or John Locke, Aung San Suu Kyi takes the much more difficult route of refashioning a defense of democracy, nearly from whole cloth, from the limited reserve of Buddhist political thought. While her political motivations in doing so are undoubtedly pure, the philosophic soundness of the approach is decidedly less so. If, even to a thinker as intimately familiar with Western political thought as Aung San Suu Kyi<sup>85</sup>, the project of refashioning a defense of democracy from the scraps of Buddhist political thought is seen as a more workable project than trying to justify democracy to the citizens of Myanmar using the well-trodden

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<sup>85</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi holds a B.A. in Politics, Economics, and Philosophy and an M.A. in Politics from the University of Oxford.

democratic theory of Western political thought, the only reasonable conclusion must be that the philosophic premises of Western political thought are so unintelligible within the context of Burmese political life and so lacking in meaning and value to Burmese Buddhist practitioners that they must be scrapped along together.

Once again, the situation is made clear that Buddhist political thought must first and foremost be understood in its capacity as Buddhist. This is not simply a matter of Hobbes wrapping his secular political theory in a garb of Christian rhetoric. Whereas Hobbes speaks in Christian terms, his project was one of secularization. In the case of Aung San Suu Kyi and her compatriots in the project of integrating Western political conceptions such as democracy and rights in the Buddhist political world, the project has not been one of secularizing Buddhist principles to fit within the context of Western pluralism, but instead of Buddhifying Western political conceptions to fit within the general structure of a traditional Buddhist understanding of political life.

As a practical matter, Aung San Suu Kyi has been a fantastic emissary for Burmese democracy, both at home and abroad. However, her successes should not mask the problems which underlie the problematic nature of her project. The issues that arise from the perspective of the West when Aung San Suu Kyi expresses her belief in the necessity of moral purity in political life (democratic or otherwise) by claiming that “rulers must observe the teachings of the Buddha” should be viewed as no different and no less troubling than when Muslims claim the same of Allah or Christians of Jesus, even if Aung San Suu Kyi presents the teachings of the Buddha as expressing “concepts of truth, righteousness and loving kindness.”<sup>86</sup> While it would be difficult to argue from a rhetorical perspective that the teachings of the Buddha are not

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., Pg 177.

decidedly peaceful, the recent violence in Myanmar highlights the reality that any politics built on a theological ideology (even one that preaches a lack of ideological structure and rigor) is a theocratic danger all the same and brings with it the potential of all of the same perils of more overtly destructive regimes. Though Myanmar may fail to reach the standards of traditional definitions of theocracy, characterized as rule by the formal priesthood, the standing of Buddhism as the animating force of political life nevertheless renders this as a distinction without a deeply-seated difference.

We can see the expression of this reality in a number of other facets of contemporary Burmese politics. The so-called Saffron Revolution of 2007, undeniably successful in demonstrating to the military government the widespread support for democratic reforms, was so thoroughly associated with the monastic leaders who helped spur its success that it will forever be remembered in light of the saffron color of their robes. And this support was by no means merely spiritual in nature. Beyond their traditional role of providing a spiritual foundation and guide for proper political action, some Burmese Buddhist monks during the Saffron Revolution took to direct political action. Though it should be acknowledged that those who took such action were a relatively small number in comparison to the larger *sangha*, groups such as the All Burma Monks Alliance were essential to the democratic effort, providing “pamphlets and journals that contained poems and articles on topics, including human rights, the role of the sangha in Burmese society, and democracy...from a monastic point of view.”<sup>87</sup>

While employing language of “human rights” is certainly a more Westernized approach, Walton notes that this use of Western language is more the exception than the rule. According to his assessment of the monk’s literature,

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<sup>87</sup> Walton, Matthew J. “Buddhist Monks and Democratic Politics in Contemporary Myanmar.” in Kawanami, Hiroko. *Buddhism and the Political Process*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. Pg 66.

Even though many of the articles describe democracy in terms reminiscent of liberalism (e.g. claiming that human rights are an inalienable birthright of all people), the authors also understand democratic practice in terms that might be foreign or even unacceptable to those within the liberal democratic tradition. One article lists a number of qualities and practices that embody democracy. First on the list is *si kan*, or ‘discipline,’ the same word that qualifies the military’s ‘disciplined democracy’ and that has figured prominently in speeches by opposition activists, including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and 88 Generation leader Min Ko Naing. *Si kan* is complemented by another element, ‘morality,’ which reinforces the central place of correct moral action in politics, even in a democracy. The list also includes equality, unity, citizenship, and protecting traditional religion.<sup>88</sup>

As with Aung San Suu Kyi, the political monks of the Saffron Revolution were proponents of democracy but on decidedly Buddhist terms. This practice has continued, if not accelerated, beyond the Saffron Revolution, with Buddhist political organizations in Myanmar such as Ma Ba Tha (the same group which stands accused of driving the anti-Muslim sentiment responsible for the Rohingya crisis) bringing about a rhetorical shift in the country away from a language of secularism in favor of a strong invocation of Buddhist values.<sup>89</sup> Even if some of the language employed in contemporary Burmese political debate are compatible with Western liberalism, such as a defense of human rights, this value is negated by their subsequent employment of theocratic justifications for self-rule. From the perspective of the Western insistence on the separation of church and state, it is not sufficient to support a liberal form of government (as democracy is typically understood to be) without the incumbent protections against the flaws of democracy that have been understood as necessary by Western political thought since the inception of its tradition of political theory several millennia ago. Even though Buddhism may be generally compatible with the liberal tradition and mirror its contours in many

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., Pg 67.

<sup>89</sup> Walton (2018), Pg 189.

ways, it is not synonymous with it, and any attempt to simply substitute one concept with the other is doomed to fail at a matter of first principles.

This issue is drawn into clear focus by Hiroko Kawanami. Examining the Buddhist beliefs and practices of U Nu, arguably the man most singularly responsible for the reintroduction of Buddhism into the political sphere in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Kawanami argues that though U Nu believed in the essential importance of bringing a connection between the moral sphere of Buddhism and the political sphere of Burma, the relationship between the two is more complicated than it at first appears.<sup>90</sup> The Buddhism of U Nu and the extremist political Buddhism of a contemporary organization like Ma Ba Tha are radically different in his assessment. U Nu, like many of his contemporaries in the Burmese Independence movement, was educated in Western-friendly universities such as the University of Rangoon. Many of his contemporaries, like the stridently secular Aung San, viewed Buddhism as both a hindrance to their overarching political goals and a matter that was rightly left separate from political life. Yet though this was a popular position among the political elites of the independence movement, it was not indicative of a popular shift throughout the majority of the country, who remained largely rural and uneducated. During the era of his rule U Nu, a man already predisposed to accepting a connection between Buddhism and political life due to his well-documented piety, began to realize the political value of a newly conceived Buddhist nationalism.<sup>91</sup> He employed ancient Buddhist political techniques, such as framing his rule in light of the principles and actions of Asoka.<sup>92</sup> But what Kawanami argues is important to note is that despite his piety and his employment of classic Buddhist political techniques, the religious practices and beliefs of U

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<sup>90</sup> Kawanami, Hiroko. "U Nu's Liberal Democracy and Buddhist Communalism in Modern Burma." in Kawanami, Hiroko. *Buddhism and the Political Process*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, Pg 35.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, Pg 37.



Nu were tinged with modern sentiments and colored by his liberal, Westernized education. U Nu and those of his cohort were “trying to free themselves from traditional shackles, ignorance, and ‘irrational’ superstitious beliefs by prescribing to the new discourse of ‘reformed Buddhism,’ which they considered more suited to modern times.”<sup>93</sup>

As a matter of Buddhist practice, these differences aren’t particularly meaningful, as varying conceptions of Buddhist thought and practice are accepted, if not encouraged. But as a matter of political concern, these differences are an entirely different matter as they allowed U Nu to paint too rosy a picture of what a modern intermingling of Buddhism and political life would entail in a contemporary setting, divorced from the contexts and constraints of the traditional Buddhist era in Burma. According to Kawanami,

Perhaps, U Nu did not, especially in his early political career, realize the distance created by his progressive ideals and the harsh everyday reality of the rural masses, which were the main constituencies of Buddhist monks and nuns....the ‘Buddhism’ he had made the state religion was not the peaceful and moral religion that he had envisaged, but a ‘Buddhism’ that asserted its chauvinistic, exclusivist, and self-righteous face.”<sup>94</sup>

Though U Nu was inarguably a devout Buddhist, his “idealistic, individualistic, and rational” understanding of Buddhism was not the same as that of the masses of his country, and subsequently not the same as that which would be implemented in practice once those masses were allowed political agency.<sup>95</sup> U Nu’s project was failed by an assumption that political liberalism and Buddhist political practice were inherently compatible.

Kawanami concludes with a personal assessment of the problems underlying the movement in Myanmar (and arguably the Buddhist community at large) towards democracy.

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., Pg 35.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., Pg 50.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., Pg 49.

“Perhaps,” he writes, “we [in the West] have to acknowledge that values and concepts we take for granted in our liberal political rhetoric do not necessarily sway the public opinion in a traditional society. In contrast, Burmese consciousness has seen its expressions in religious and ethnic communalism that has given the people an inner core to fight oppression and ward off outside interference.”<sup>96</sup> This notion, not that people in Myanmar are not capable of liberal democracy but rather are simply not particularly swayed by its claims, is not a common argument throughout the literature on contemporary Buddhist movements towards democracy. Most authors, such as Matthew Walton, take as an assumption that democracy is a good thing that all Buddhists would likely embrace were they able to find a solid foundation upon which to ground it. These foundations needn’t be liberal, and likely wouldn’t be in practice, but can instead be accomplished through a reconfiguration of Buddhist political theory into something that barely resembles the political practice Buddhists found their political thought to require for the last several thousand years. The goal is to discover a way for Buddhist countries to eschew Western models of democracy and diverge from traditional Western justifications for it yet still find something from within the Buddhist tradition itself which will work to justify it in practice.<sup>97</sup>

The issue inherent in these attempts, be it in the name of the discipline-based democracy favored by the Burmese military regime or communitarian ideals such as those espoused by some in the contemporary debate in Myanmar, is that they lack safeguards inherent in the democratic practices of the West. This problem is extremely salient in regards to an argument to justify democracy on communitarian grounds in light of Myanmar’s largely homogenous religious demographics. Much like the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in the wake of

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., Pg 58.

the Arab Spring, democracy becomes difficult to justify on moral grounds when it is wielded simply as a tool to usher in democratically elected forms of oppression.

How can a movement towards democracy in Myanmar help correct a problem like the ever-worsening Rohingya crisis? In reality, a movement towards democracy, if it is coupled with an understanding that “to be Burmese is to be Buddhist,” is likely only to worsen the already volatile situation. In this regard, from the perspective of the religious minorities of Myanmar the singular oppression of a despotic military junta is no different than the new condition of two wolves and a sheep voting on dinner.<sup>98</sup> As much as the recent political history of Myanmar is plagued by a lack of political agency, the recent movement towards democracy coupled with the Buddhist nationalist sentiment stirred in the twentieth century has created a condition where the rise of agency is liable to cause a reciprocal decrease in the political rights of those outside the Buddhist community.

### **Rights, Buddhist and Human**

The Western argument for democracy is inherently tied to the concurrent Western understanding of rights. Democracy is not valued because it is a clean and efficient form of government (it is decidedly neither of those) but because it is the form of government which most clearly aligns with and encapsulates the liberal principles which define modern political life. Democracy is meant to be a way to promote the right of self-rule inherent in the modern understanding of citizens as equal individuals worthy of equal political rights. The ancient criticism of Plato and Aristotle about the dangers of democracy are (mostly) assuaged by the protections granted to minorities, expressed and codified most clearly in the Constitution of the United States of America. In this regard, Publius’ dissection of the problem of faction and

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<sup>98</sup> And arguably is worse, as at least under the old regime certain minorities could win favor.

minority rights in *Federalist 10* takes on a particular resonance in light of the problems created by the Buddhist nationalist bloc which dominates modern Burmese political life. But Publius and the thinkers of the liberal tradition which came before and after his writing share in common a number of first principles which led them to this position of seeing the desirability and necessity of the protection of political minorities. Though Publius promoted self-rule in his argument in favor of the Constitution, it was in the model of a decidedly tempered democratic form. The Constitution of the United States is premised on the notion that the fundamental sovereignty of the people is best expressed through a system wherein the people are the foundation of political decisions, but equally wherein the unbridled passions of natural-forming factions must be constrained in favor of a general disposition towards the common good of society at large. This argument is made not in light of some merely pragmatic concern for governmental efficiency but on the basis of a fundamental claim of individual rights which demand protection from the whims and wills of powerful factions.

The Buddhist tradition lacks this foundation. As I argue in Chapters Two and Three, the foundations of the liberal preoccupation with rights stems from its view of the individual as the primary unit of political analysis coupled with a presentation of political action as actuated through the secular state. As I further argue, the Buddhist political tradition not only lacks these foundations, but instead makes assertions about the nature of the self and being which negate the philosophic power of these positions for those who take the claims of the Buddhist tradition seriously. As a matter of foundations, the Western political tradition and the Buddhist political tradition not only disagree but lack a common philosophic and political language in order to help reach some sort of reconcilable shared political ground. This in and of itself is not particularly alarming or surprising as it relates strictly to a comparative political analysis, but as a matter of

political practice in an ever-shrinking world, as these two political traditions begin to come into conflict (and particularly come into conflict in the context of being political and philosophic equals, unlike the conditions found in the unbalanced power dynamics of the colonial era) these differences cease to be a merely academic concern and have very practical consequences.

Throughout the literature on the transition of traditionally Buddhist countries into the sphere of Western political life there is a good deal of discussion of the idea of democratization but comparatively little on the subject of rights. In the context of Buddhist politics the two are seemingly understood as either disjointed notions or the practicalities of discussing the easily observable process of democratization are given preference over the more difficult to discern political principles which underlie the transition as a matter of political theory. What discussion there is of rights in relation to Buddhist political thought is presented in terms of the attempt to situate the Western understanding of rights (usually discussed in the context of human rights in particular) into the language and context of Buddhist political thought and practice. The problem arises that there is no cognate (direct or indirect) for the Western understanding of rights within Buddhist political thought.<sup>99</sup> The response to this reality by Buddhist scholars has largely not been to attempt to address the standing (or lack thereof) of rights protections with the context of Buddhist political philosophy on its own terms, but rather to comb through the Buddhist lexicon for concepts that can closely enough approximate the Western conception of rights that they can be used to create a foundation for a cross-cultural philosophic convergence, however approximate it may be.

The most fruitful of this work on Buddhist “rights” has come from Damien Keown. Throughout a number of books and articles Keown has set forth a two-pronged project: first, to

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<sup>99</sup> Tsomo, Karma Lekshe. “Buddhist Perspectives on Human Rights.” in Emmanuel, Steven M., editor. *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy*. Wiley Blackwell, 2016. Pg 652.

determine if the notion of human rights can be identified as already existing anywhere within the Buddhist tradition, and second, to determine where a conception of rights can be grounded within the Buddhist tradition should they be found to not exist there fully in the first place. Keown's conclusion is a sort of hybrid answer that seems address both goals at once, while more fully satisfying the later. In his article "Are There 'Human Rights' in Buddhism?," Keown concludes that

it is legitimate to speak of both rights and human rights in Buddhism. Modern doctrines of human rights are in harmony with the moral values of classical Buddhism in that they are an explication of what is "due" under Dharma. The modern idea of human rights has a distinctive cultural origin, but its underlying preoccupation with human good makes it at bottom a moral issue in which Buddhism and other religions have a legitimate stake.<sup>100</sup>

Keown's answer is interesting here not necessarily for its conclusions but for its logic in arriving there. Keown's assertion that there is a legitimate claim to speak of rights within the context of Buddhist political thought, which has come to be echoed by many who wish to ground Buddhism in context of Western politics (both scholars and practitioners alike), is premised not on the achievement of actually locating a meaningful cognate (linguistic or philosophical) but rather by claiming that there are elements of thinking within Buddhist thought which are attempting to reach the same goals and ends as those of the rights-based language of the West. It is not a direct discovery, but rather a discovery by triangulation. The teachings of the Buddha and the rights claims of the West differ only as a matter of "form rather than substance." Even if the language differs and "the concept of human rights is not likely to be useful in... following the Buddha Dharma," the content and substance of the claims of Western liberalism are wholly agreeable with Buddhist teaching and practice.<sup>101</sup> By this logic then, liberal notions such as rights aren't

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<sup>100</sup> Keown, Damien. "Are There 'Human Rights' in Buddhism?" *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 2: 3-27. 1995. Pg 28.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, Pg 26.

necessarily found within Buddhist thought but they are found to be so compatible with Buddhist thought that we can rightfully speak of the two as undertaking in agreeing (if not concurrent) projects.

While Keown and others make a convincing case that Buddhist conceptions of human good, as seen through ideas like the Buddhist duty to minimize suffering, are a relatively convincing stand-in for rights in most practical instances, situations like the crisis in Myanmar underscore the importance of the occasions where this notion breaks down.<sup>102</sup> As with the attempt to ground a liberal Buddhist politics on the idea of compassion (which will be discussed below in the context of the socially-engaged Buddhist political movement), the preoccupation of Buddhist scholars to ground a Western-style conception of rights within the framework of Buddhist political thought belies a more complicated political reality.

While Buddhist claims of duty and compassion do certainly seem to guide action in the direction of a respect of fundamental rights of others, Buddhist scholarship has been far too quick to relieve these Buddhist claims of their essential standing, not as abstract and universal philosophic principles but rather as particular religious claims of a particular religious tradition. Though both Buddhists and Western liberals are equally likely to fall short of the desired aims of their respective philosophies in practice, the fundamental difference between Buddhist claims and liberal claims is that the latter premises itself on a foundation of abstracted reason. The claims of equality of modern liberalism are not held to be true as a function of the faith claims of a religious doctrine or tradition but rather are held to be so by way of their standing as

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<sup>102</sup> See also Schmidt-Leukel, Perry. "Buddhism and the Idea of Human Rights: Resonances and Dissonances." *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 26: 33-49. 2006.; Tsomo, Karma Lekshe. "Buddhist Perspectives on Human Rights." in Emmanuel, Steven M., editor. *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy*. Wiley Blackwell, 2016.; and Badge, Uttamkumars. "Essential Elements of Human Rights in Buddhism." *Journal of Law and Conflict Resolution* 6: 32-38. 2014.

universally recognizable principles, capable of being derived by all solely as a function of reason. Western rights claims are a result of accepting the core liberal claim of the primacy of the individual and spinning off a moral universe from this foundation. It is achieved in such a way as to be universally demonstrable to anyone who undertakes the project. While many claims are made (and not without some justification) that Buddhism is equally a philosophy as much as a religion because it allows for its claims to be tested and for a seemingly limitless number of acceptable paths to reach its desired end of enlightenment, this defense of Buddhism against the traditional criticisms of religious rigidity is just as much a Western reformulation and apologia as it is a reality grounded in Buddhist tradition. Buddhism undoubtedly suffers far less from the problems of imposed doctrine and heretical distress compared to any other of the major world religions. But the disingenuous attempt to divorce Buddhism from its nature as a soteriological tool in favor of an understanding of Buddhism simply as philosophy or a way of life fails to take it seriously on its own terms. Buddhism, as much as it is malleable and philosophic and open to differences in practice, is nonetheless a collection of religious doctrines, codes, and institutions all the same and must be approached as such. A Buddhist political actor (acting in the name of Buddhist principles) is not a liberal, even when his actions align with liberal goals. Accidental concurrence (however frequent it may be) should not be allowed to be confused with actual philosophical alignment.

Given this perspective, the claims of Buddhist scholars that the alignment in goals between Buddhism thought and liberal notions such as rights is sufficient to view the two as compatible (if not allied) become far more problematic. Because of their nature as religious claims rather than philosophic claims, the restraints placed on human action by Buddhist teachings are not, nor can ever rightly claim to be, universal in a way compelling to modern



pluralistic society. A government led by Buddhist principles is by definition non-pluralistic, as the very foundations of its rule are premised on a notion of the primacy of Buddhist truths over any disputing claims made by those over which it rules. Even in the case of Buddhism, the most open and pluralistic of the major world religions, a Buddhist government is nonetheless a theocracy the same as any other. Though the teachings of the Buddha would seem to direct this government in the direction of an open and relatively free (almost liberal, one could argue) society, the government will only be as successful in achieving these ends as it is successful in upholding Buddhist principles and, more importantly, only insofar as its understanding of Buddhist principles is aligned with this liberal understanding of Buddhist thought and practice. We are left to the whims of the practice and interpretation of the country's Buddhist leaders to maintain good Buddhist governance. Liberal constitutional restraints are replaced with the restraints of the *dhamma*. In this regard, the openness of practice and interpretation of Buddhism is a double-edged sword. If there is no "wrong" way to be a Buddhist (and arguably not even a criterion of better or worse practice), then from what principles is a Buddhist government really led in practice? Lacking a strong and philosophically universal conception of restraining principles such as Western rights, a Buddhist political life is only as well protected as the government and its leaders are faithful to the Buddha. As Daniel Bell describes it,

The entrenchment of liberalism prior to democratization gave Western liberal democracy its historically specific form, namely, a democracy shaped and structured within the limits set by liberal values and assumptions. But things are different in East Asia. Where there's been democratization, democratic practices have typically been grafted onto societies with different cultural backgrounds and different ways of organizing their economic life. There's no reason to expect that democracy in Asia will be constrained by Western liberalism.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Bell, Daniel. *East Meets West: Human Rights and Democracy in East Asia*. Princeton University Press, 2000. Pg 158.

Even when Buddhism mirrors liberalism, which admittedly is quite frequently in many instances, care must be taken that they are not assumed to now be synonymous (or in the case of Keown, so closely aligned that they are synonymous for all practical accounts). The protections of rights within Buddhism are not taken on the terms of rights themselves, but instead on the terms of Buddhist thought and practice. In most instances, this is sufficient. But in others, such as contemporary Myanmar, when the Buddhist conceptions of “rights” breaks down the consequences can be dire for those not granted protection by Buddhist doctrine.

### **The Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar and the Failure of Buddhist Conceptions of “Rights”**

In late August 2018, the Human Rights Council of the United Nations released a report which accused the government of Myanmar of undertaking a scheme of systematic violence against minority groups within the country’s Kachin, Rakhine, and Shan states. Most surprisingly, given the international community’s hesitance to act in years prior, the treatment of Muslim Rohingya population in the Rakhine state was formally labeled as a genocide.<sup>104</sup>

Most mainstream academic accounts of the problem of human rights in Myanmar make no effort to address the issue of Buddhism, let alone the country's roots in Buddhist political theory. They choose instead to view the difficulties as a function of institutional workings<sup>105</sup>, problems of practical implementation<sup>106</sup>, or basic roadblocks common to all democratization efforts<sup>107</sup>. While these lenses are undoubtedly valuable to gain a full and nuanced picture of the problem, the choice to ignore the Buddhist heritage of Southeast Asia belies an unstated

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<sup>104</sup> Human Rights Council of the United Nations. “Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar- Advanced Unedited Version.” 24 August 2018. Pg 16.

<sup>105</sup> Ciorciari, John. “Institutionalizing Human Rights in Southeast Asia.” *Human Rights Quarterly* 34: 695-725. 2012.; Davies, Mathew. “The Perils of Incoherence: ASEAN, Myanmar and the Avoidable Failures of Human Rights Socialization.” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 34: 1-22. 2012.

<sup>106</sup> Kinley David and Trevor Wilson. “Engaging a Pariah: Human Rights Training in Burma/Myanmar.” *Human Rights Quarterly* 29: 368-402. 2007.

<sup>107</sup> Holliday, Ian. “Thinking About Transitional Justice in Myanmar.” *Southeast Asia Research* 22: 183-200. 2014.

assumption on the part of these authors that the Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia and those of the West are unquestioningly compatible as a matter of underlying political theory. No effort is made to address this issue because seemingly no effort is necessary. This choice to ignore the philosophic underpinnings of Burmese political life is a short-sighted and counter-productive assumption when attempting to understand the nature of human rights, which are inherently a matter of political theory.

At its core, the problem is one of recognition. The stance of political leaders in Burma for the last several decades, including Western darling Aung San Suu Kyi, has been that to be Burmese is to be Buddhist. This notion, coupled with the political tendency to divide and classify groups within the country that has resulted as a hangover from the era of British rule, has led to a condition wherein the Muslim Rohingya of the country are not only vilified but their very existence is called into question. A popular refrain of anti-Rohingya Buddhist nationalists in Myanmar, including the Burmese government itself, has been to assert that there is no mistreatment of Rohingya in the country because there are no Rohingya at all in the country to mistreat. A member of the security forces in the Rakhine state (the area most thoroughly affected by the Rohingya crisis) was quoted as saying that “There is no such thing as Rohingya. It is fake news.”<sup>108</sup> This claim, ridiculous on its face but nonetheless an important rhetorical position for those seeking to justify the treatment of the Muslim population by the Buddhist government, typifies the absurdities of the tension which underlies the Rohingya crisis.

The history of the Rohingya in Myanmar is well-established, if not relatively short within the scope of the larger history of Myanmar. The Rohingya people are native to the lands of the northern Burmese state of Rakhine, as well as the adjacent areas of neighboring Bangladesh.

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<sup>108</sup> Beech, Hannah. “‘No Such Thing as Rohingya’: Myanmar Erases a History.” *The New York Times* 2 December 2017. Web. 9 September 2018.

Movement in the areas was more or less unabated during much of the traditional era of Burmese history. With the country lacking a strong, centralized authority to govern over the difficult terrain, the Rohingya lived in relative peace with the neighboring Bamar of Burma. When the two groups finally did come into conflict in the late eighteenth century, the Rohingya in the region fled to the neighboring region of Bengal, then under British control. Following the subsequent colonialization of Burma by the British, the British encouraged a massive influx of residents from Bengal into the adjacent regions of Burma, believing these subjects to be more politically amicable.<sup>109</sup> This sentiment came to be shared by the Buddhists of Burma, who viewed the immigrated Muslims as “stooges of the British” and more inclined to seek to chip away at the Buddhist values of the country than the similarly immigrating Hindu populations.<sup>110</sup>

In the initial years of Burmese independence, characterized by their attempts at secularism, the Rohingya population was granted equal rights to all others in the country. This began to change in the intervening years, with the re-adoption of a Buddhist nationalist identity by the military government. The issue came to a head in the early 1980s, when the military government began to emphasize a renewed connection between ethnic identities and basic political standing in the country. It was at this point that the Burmese government arrived at the now infamous calculation of 135 separate ethnic identities, labeled as “national races” in the country (lowered from the British count of 139, and the count of 144 by Ne Win a decade earlier).<sup>111</sup> Though these divisions were framed in light of a mythos of heritage and historicity, in reality these divisions lacked a great deal of meaningful historical substance. As David Brown notes, “in pre-colonial Burma, political alignments were not primarily based upon stable

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<sup>109</sup> Wade, Pg 27.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., Pg 20.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., Pg 47.

linguistic cleavages, but were instead characterized by fluctuating patron-client linkages.”<sup>112</sup>

Thus this new understanding of ethnic division is not inherent to the Burmese understanding of political life, but rather is a result of “the impact upon Burmese society of the modern state structure.”<sup>113</sup> The movement in 1983 to tie Burmese citizenship and political rights to one’s standing in one of these 135 ethnic groups was just a continuation of the project began by the British to move Burma away from the Buddhist politics of its traditional era into a condition of modern statehood. The intervening years have shown the dangers of grafting this structure onto a condition which lacks the appropriate grounding. Wielding the power of a state apparatus, the Burmese military junta preceded to pick and choose by its own criteria those whose rights would be respected and those who would become the political “other.”

Even in the modern era, the contemporary Rohingya crisis is not the first example of the dangers of the idea of “national races” serving as the standard for political recognition in Burma. In the 1960s, hundreds of thousands of Indian and Chinese Burmese (some of whom were even mixed-race with Bamar) were expelled from the country, forfeiting both their citizenship and their property, in the name of Ne Win’s “Burmese Path to Socialism.”<sup>114</sup> When Ne Win announced almost twenty years later the Citizenship Act of 1982, the process began again, this time taking its toll on the Rohingya.<sup>115</sup> The thirty-plus intervening years have been ones of steady decline of political recognition, reaching a new apex with the introduction of democracy to the country following 2008. This has culminated in a situation where the Burmese government

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<sup>112</sup> Brown (2002), Pg 34.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., Pg 35.

<sup>114</sup> Wade, Pg 49.

<sup>115</sup> Wade (2017) relates a story of Burmese citizens from a young age being forced to take on artificial accents and lying about their non-Bamar heritage, erasing “complex ancestry” in favor of an artificial history which aligns with the regime’s homogenous ethnic preferences, in order to receive basic social and political recognition. (Pgs 44-47) In this regard, the crisis in Myanmar can be regarded not solely as a traditional genocide accomplished through violent ends, but a cultural genocide as well, with complex heritages many generations deep being lost through simple administrative bureaucracy.

has become forced to play a linguistic game wherein the mere mention and acknowledgement of the term “Rohingya” as a meaningful ethnic category has been banned. The situation has gone so far as to find Aung San Suu Kyi herself speaking to ambassadors from the United Nations, asking that they too refrain from using the term.<sup>116</sup> The reason for this careful dance is that the Rohingya ethnicity is not one of the acknowledged 135 “national races,” and were the term to become formalized and normalized the Burmese government would lose the political grounding for its position of holding that the Rohingya are not true Burmese citizens and are instead Bengali interlopers. This necessity of this position was amplified following the discovery and release of a formerly secret repatriation agreement between Burma and Bangladesh wherein the Burmese government acknowledged the legal standing of the Rohingya in the country in the 1970s.<sup>117</sup> As a result of this policy of erasure, Rohingya peoples in Myanmar have been forced to self-identity as “Bengali” if they wish to avoid harassment from the Burmese security forces or receive aid in any refugee camp in the country. By renouncing the title of Rohingya and taking on the Bengali moniker, they are tacitly admitting to their standing as an illegal immigrant within Myanmar, sacrificing their long-term standing for the necessities of immediate concerns.<sup>118</sup>

The advent of democracy saw a renewed political interest in the ethnic divisions of the country, as they began to take on a new level of importance with the increase of self-rule. While the ethnic divisions under the military junta were merely a way to create unity among a majority of the Buddhist population by way of alienating lesser minorities, the newly found ability to vote raised the stakes, meaning that now these divisions represented an actual source of political

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<sup>116</sup> Paddock, Richard C. “Aung San Suu Kyi Asks U.N. Not to Refer to ‘Rohingya’.” *The New York Times* 6 May 2016. Web. 17 September 2018.

<sup>117</sup> Coor, Anders. “Secret 1978 Document Indicates Burma Recognized Rohingya Legal Residence.” *Forbes* 29 December 2016. Web. 17 September 2018.

<sup>118</sup> Ferrie, Jared. “Why Myanmar’s Rohingya are Forced to Say They Are Bengali.” *The Christian Science Monitor* 2 June 2013. Web. 17 September 2018.

standing. It is not a coincidence then that the rise of the mistreatment of the Rohingya coincides almost exactly with the rise democracy in the country. “Otherness” was no longer a trifling matter of curiosity, but instead one of true and pressing political importance.

The Muslim community in Myanmar initially viewed the rise of open elections as a source of hope, with Aung San Suu Kyi as its hero in waiting. Even in majority Muslim areas, with Muslim candidates on the ballot, Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy party received as much as 80% of the vote share. Though Aung San Suu Kyi and her party had made no specific promises to the Muslim population regarding issues of political rights, they were viewed (likely in no small part due to Aung San Suu Kyi’s history of noble rhetoric) as a superior alternative to the burgeoning Buddhist radical movements which were beginning to take shape.<sup>119</sup>

It has been these same groups that have in the years since the 2012 elections come to play such a defining role in the story of the treatment of the Rohingya. Within Myanmar there have been two key groups which have spurred along the political and cultural effects of the Anti-Muslim movement. The first of these is the more politically-minded Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion, better known by the name Ma Ba Tha. This organization, led by Buddhist monks themselves, is essentially the modern continuation of the Buddhist nationalist groups formed in the early twentieth century as a response to British influence and the supposed decline of Burmese Buddhist culture in its wake, albeit amplified to fit the modern condition. Described as “ultra-nationalist,” Ma Ba Tha has focused their efforts in stoking anti-Muslim sentiment in the north and western regions of Myanmar in the name of protecting the country’s

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<sup>119</sup> Ramzy (2015).

Buddhist heritage.<sup>120</sup> The second organization, closely aligned as matter of ideology but more loosely structured and content to employ violence to reach its ends, is the so-called 969 Movement, named as a numerological opponent to the “786” which adorns the outside of Muslim owned businesses.<sup>121</sup> Engaging in efforts ranging from as basic as boycotts of Muslim-owned businesses to outright riotous violence, the group has aligned itself with pro-Buddhist militia groups in the Rakhine region such as the Arakan Army.<sup>122</sup> Though initially focused primarily on the Rohingya populations in the Rakhine state, the Anti-Muslim sentiments and actions of these organizations has increasingly begun to now spill into Myanmar at large.<sup>123</sup>

The rhetoric of these organizations makes clear that they understand the seeming inconsistencies between the teachings of the Buddha and their own violent actions, but view them as a forgivable necessity in light of what they believe to be an existential threat not only to Burmese culture but to the teachings of the *dhamma* itself. Francis Wade describes what he calls an “on-off switch” wherein a Buddhist practitioner can seemingly temporarily separate himself from the teachings of the *dhamma* in order to serve the Buddha’s truth at a higher, heretofore unseen level. Interviewing high-ranking Ma Ba Tha member U Parmoukkha, the monk discusses his understanding of the innate, violent nature of Islam, describing Muslims as trained from an early age in extremist ideals. As a result, the radicalism of Islam must be met with a radicalism in Buddhism, not as a matter of exchanging behavior kind for kind, but as part of a long-term strategy to ensure that this sort of behavior remains unacceptable. As he sees it, “When Buddhism is on the verge of extinction [a common theme in the rhetoric of the Burmese

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<sup>120</sup> McPherson, Poppy. “We Must Protect our Country: Extremist Buddhists Target Mandalay’s Muslims.” *The Guardian* 8 May 2017. Web. 18 September 2018.

<sup>121</sup> Wade, Pg 136.

<sup>122</sup> Bashar, Iftekharul. “Myanmar.” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 7: 17-20. 2015.

<sup>123</sup> Walton (2018), Pg 34.



Buddhist extremists], violence could probably be used. If there is no Buddhism, there will be more violence, and the situation will be even worse... In Buddhism, all the robbery, all the killings are seen as bad deeds. So if there is no Buddhism, ideas might come about that these acts are not sinful. There would be no one to teach that they are bad.”<sup>124</sup> Like the foundations of the modern political thought of the West, it is a politics driven by fear. But unlike Hobbes, this is not a fear of death, at least not personal temporal death. Within the political sphere, it is the fear of the death of the Buddhist identity. But at a deeper level it is a fear of spiritual death, the death not only of an entire body of religious truths but of the Truth, the *dhamma* and *śāsana*, themselves.

To the Buddhist extremists in Myanmar, the battle against the country’s Muslims is not simply a matter of ethnicity but a truly cosmic battle wrapped in the guise of identitarian politics. This framing of the violence perpetuated against the Rohingya on the part of Burmese Buddhists emphasizes the reality of the dangers posed by a theocratic regime, even one ruled by a seemingly peaceful religion such as Buddhism. Left with the tools of a modern state apparatus but none of the concerns for restraining the use of that apparatus against its country’s minority populations (and in reality, emboldened through a divine calling to do quite the opposite) the situation has continued to worsen as it has been left unabated. Yet the behavior is able to be justified through a rhetoric which frames the perpetrators as the victims, and more importantly, as party to the undertaking of a divine task. Politics becomes thoroughly intertwined with claims to religious truth. In this regard it is not surprising to find a Burmese politician linking the fate of Burma with the battle of intertwined ethno-religious struggles in the Middle East, “We need to have a policy; an exclusive one, for these people [the Rohingya] and figure out how to defend

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<sup>124</sup> Wade, Pg 195.

this region [the Rakhine state]- they will be repeatedly invading our territory... We need to be like Israel.”<sup>125</sup>

The result has been years of continued mistreatment of the country’s Muslim population, rising to the degree that the Commissioner for Human Rights in the United Nations would publically declare that the actions of the Burmese government constitute a “textbook example of ethnic cleansing.”<sup>126</sup> The abuses of the Rohingya are also not limited to structural and institutional harms. Reports from the region indicate that sentiment among the local Buddhist population is equally hostile, with local Rohingya reportedly being told to “leave or we will kill you all.”<sup>127</sup> Squalid conditions, both physical and political, have forced a mass exodus of the Muslim population into neighboring regions of Bangladesh, where conditions in the overcrowded refugee camps are not much better. From within the chaos recent reports have also emerged of Rohingya children, some as young as thirteen, falling victim to kidnapping and sex-trafficking.<sup>128</sup>

Much of the violence undertaken by the Buddhists in the Rakhine state is justified on the premise that it was provoked by prior violence by the Muslim population. While evidence is thin that the violence in the region was initiated by any sustained effort on the part of the Rohingya, this has started to change as the region descends deeper into political discord.<sup>129</sup> Amnesty International confirmed in a report from May 2018 that Muslim rebellion group Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) was responsible for an August 2017 attack in the Rakhine

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., Pg 117.

<sup>126</sup> Cumming-Bruce, Nick. “Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar Is ‘Ethnic Cleansing,’ U.N. Rights Chief Says.” *The New York Times* 11 September 2017. Web. 23 September 2018.

<sup>127</sup> Baynes, Chris. “Burma: Buddhists Tell Rohingya Muslims ‘Leave or We Will Kill You All’, Refugees Pleading for Safe Passage Say.” *Independent* 18 September 2017. Web. 9 September 2018.

<sup>128</sup> “The Rohingya Children Trafficked for Sex.” *BBC News* 20 March 2018. Web. 9 September 2018.

<sup>129</sup> Wade, Pg 145.

state that killed ninety-nine Hindus.<sup>130</sup> This attack, and other (real or perceived) acts of violence on the part of the Rohingya has served to ramp up not only the anti-Muslim rhetoric but action as well. The Buddhist nationalists in the region conjure images of Muslim expansion drawing from the dual resources of the (largely unsuccessful) Muslim separatist groups of the 1980s and early 1990s, as well as threats from the Islamic State (ISIS). For its part, ISIS has at least taken this possibility seriously, making a public appeal to the Muslim population there to formally rebel against their government rather than simply relocating to avoid its oppression.<sup>131</sup>

Throughout the years of building crisis, the Burmese government has stayed largely quite on this issue and has sought to deflect whenever this strategy has proven unsustainable. The majority of the criticism for the government's behavior has fallen on Aung San Suu Kyi, understood as the country's de facto head of state and the leader of its ruling party. Yet even here, despite her reputation of promoting human rights (using the language of both the Western and Burmese traditions) and her Western education, criticism of Aung San Suu Kyi was slow to arrive and even then relatively moderate. Though stripped of several lesser humanitarian awards, the Nobel Committee has formally stated that Aung San Suu Kyi will not be stripped of her Nobel Peace Prize.<sup>132</sup> While there have been critiques made of Aung San Suu Kyi's seemingly blind eye towards the behavior of her government, the nature of these critiques is characterized well by Peter Cooclanis, writing for *Foreign Affairs*, who describes Aung San Suu Kyi as a "politician, not a monster." His argument, which is simultaneously lightly critical while seeking to counteract some of the more harsh condemnations of Aung San Suu Kyi, paints her as a victim

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<sup>130</sup> "Myanmar: New Evidence Reveals Rohingya Armed Group Massacred Scores in Rakhine State." *Amnesty International* 22 May 2018. Web. 9 September 2018.

<sup>131</sup> Wade, Pg 83.

<sup>132</sup> Reuters. "Aung San Suu Kyi Won't Be Stripped of Nobel Peace Prize Despite Rohingya Crisis." *The Guardian* 30 August 2018. Web. 21 September 2018.

of political circumstance, a leader who would like to do right but whose behavior is hemmed in by the fragility of her country's newly founded democracy. He traces out this logic so far as to position Aung San Suu Kyi beside Abraham Lincoln, who himself was forced to look beyond moral issues to instead focus on the immediacy of the need to preserve his country's union.<sup>133</sup> For her part, Aung San Suu Kyi has seemed willing to echo this sentiment. Speaking in September 2018, following the U.N. declaration of genocide and calls to try the country's top military officials for it, Aung San Suu Kyi, in a rare public statement on the matter, is quoted as saying that "There are, of course, ways in which, with hindsight, we might think that the situation could have been handled better, but we believe that for the sake of long-term stability and security, we have to be fair to all sides."<sup>134</sup> But Coclanis makes one final observation to end his piece, and in doing so underscores the fundamental tension at play in trying to understand the apparent disconnect between Western expectations and Aung San Suu Kyi's actions. He writes,

Western liberals erred 25 years ago in believing that Aung San Suu Kyi was somehow the avatar of universal human rights. Rather, she bravely championed human rights in the specific context of the overwhelmingly Buddhist nation-state of Myanmar, and she put a lot on the line in doing so.

She was a Buddhist Burman nationalist then, and she remains one today...<sup>135</sup>

While the political realities faced by Aung San Suu Kyi are undeniably difficult, a willingness to place the sanctity of the mythos of a liberal Buddhist political actor made flesh over the realities of her actual actions highlights the disconnect between the perception of Buddhist political behavior in Myanmar by Western observers and the reality of Buddhist

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<sup>133</sup> Coclanis, Peter. "Aung San Suu Kyi is a Politician, Not a Monster." *Foreign Policy* 14 May, 2018. Web. 9 September 2018.

<sup>134</sup> Beech, Hannah. "Rohingya Crisis 'Could Have Been Handled Better,' Aung San Suu Kyi Says." *The New York Times* 13 September 2018. Web. 17 September 2018.

<sup>135</sup> Coclanis (2018).

political behavior in practice. For many liberal Western Buddhists, the mythos of Aung San Suu Kyi's decades of struggles to enact what they believed would be a liberal Buddhist project in Myanmar have thus far outweighed observed reality. Aung San Suu Kyi was viewed as the most potent vector of liberal thought in the region, the one who would create the evidence for the practical mixture of liberal thought and a Buddhist political condition. They chose to accept her Western rhetoric without taking full account of the Buddhist principles which underlined it. And further, they assumed that her fundamental political and philosophic allegiances were with the liberal principles she frequently espoused, rather than the Buddhist principles which have proven to serve as the foundations for her political behavior. In this regard, the actions of Aung San Suu Kyi are the perfect encapsulation of the dangers of the attempt to simply reframe Western political philosophy in Buddhist terms without any deeper and more meaningful philosophic reorientation. A liberalism which must, at its core, be colored by and compliant with the truth claims of the Buddhist tradition is no liberalism at all.

### **Conclusion**

Buddhist political thought and action, particularly in the twenty-first century, is presented by many in the West as somehow detached from and above tribal, identitarian division. The idea of Buddhism's underlying universalism is given privilege in an attempt to align Buddhist politics with the underlying universalist spirit inherent in liberal political thought. But this attempt to present Buddhist politics as enlightened and above sectarian realities speaks more to Western projection about what a Buddhist politics should be than what it has shown itself to be in practice. Observers in the West struggle to reconcile the liberal rhetoric of Aung San Suu Kyi in the struggle for Burmese independence with the seeming indifference she has shown towards the plight of the Rohingya under her own party's government. Efforts are made to explain away the

comments of the Dalai Lama that "Europe belongs to the Europeans," a statement on the contemporary European refugee crisis which is undoubtedly colored by his own struggles with ethnic identity in relation to the exile of Tibetan Buddhists from their own homeland.<sup>136</sup> The Western confusion about these actions, framed as being taken by Buddhists which are otherwise normally so peaceful and open but are inexplicably acting in such uncharacteristically vile ways, is not a matter of Buddhist political actors somehow temporarily losing their senses but rather of those in the West mistakenly projecting their own liberal expectations onto Buddhist political actors who don't view themselves in any such light. Buddhists, both in the case of Aung San Suu Kyi and the Dalai Lama, are not personally beholden to the principles of liberalism (despite whatever agreement they may frequently have with them) but to the concerns of Buddhism. As with any other religious actors who have entered into the political sphere, their actions are only rightfully intelligible within the context of their religion. Western interpretations leave commentators so troubled and confused because they begin their assessment with an unstated premise that Buddhism is (at least closely enough) analogous with liberal principles such as openness and free human choice that its results should be comparable to those we would expect from a modern liberal concerned with human rights. Buddhism is viewed, albeit unintentionally and unwittingly, through Western eyes rather than those of a Buddhist raised in a traditionally Buddhist context. Respect of others is viewed as a primary good in and of itself, rather than as a secondary (albeit doctrinally necessary) consequence of the primary good of Buddhist truth. Buddhist actors are viewed first as political actors and only second as Buddhists. This Western corruption, failing to understand the Buddhist political actors as they understand themselves, can account for much of disparity between the Western expectations of these "peaceful and open"

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<sup>136</sup> Brennan, David. "Dalai Lama Says Europe is for Europeans, Refugees Should Go home and Rebuild." *Newsweek* 13 September 2018. Web. 16 September 2018.

Buddhists and the reality of their political action in practice. As it simple as it may seem, the West must understand these Buddhist actors as being Buddhists.

The issue at the heart of the integration of Buddhist societies into the sphere of Western political life is not fundamentally one of politics but of truth and its role in guiding man's proper action. Though there are particularities to Burmese Buddhist practice, such as a reasonably hierarchical *sangha* and some unique influences from Hindu practice, the traditional political history of Burma mirrors the contours and teachings of the political theory of the Pāli texts. This means rule by a king, duty bound to right action not because of the burden of his subjects' natural rights or individual dignity but because of Buddhist teachings. His rule is legitimated by his connection to Buddhism, both through shaping his actions in light of the prescriptive duties of the Pāli texts and through a close connection with the *sangha*. This is a politics whose legitimacy is not grounded in a connection to the people but in its connection to *dhamma* and wisdom. Sovereignty is not something which is granted to the ruler, as with the modern Western tradition, but rather something that is endemic to the ruler by the nature of his position as a ruler. Kings are kings because of an excess of *kammic* value, and they maintain this standing throughout their connection to the *dhamma*.

From the period of Buddhist conversion, itself brought about by a king, to the era of British rule, Burma was ruled in line with these principles. Its politics were characterized by a intermingling of political power and spiritual power, each serving to bolster the standing of the other. There was no meaningful distinction between political life and moral life. These bonds were severed by the British, rightly fearful that the influence of the Buddhist *sangha* into the political sphere would serve to undermine the standing of their state apparatus. The era of traditional Burmese political life, much like the presentation of politics in the Pāli Canon

generally, was characterized by a sublimation of the political to the truths of the *dhamma*. British colonial rule represented a quick and artificial severing of these traditional bonds in favor of a politics which privileges the rule of the morally-detached state.

The era of Burmese independence (with the exception of the brief period of secularism) makes clear that though these ties between political rule and the *dhamma* were severed by the British as a matter of form and structure, they did not succeed in wiping away the political theory which underlies the Burmese understanding of a proper political life. Through a series of hurdles and for a number of varying reasons, the several decades of a free Myanmar have made clear that the political equilibrium which underlies Burmese political life still favors a connection between Buddhist practice and political action. Though Burma was thrown into a political condition which forced it into a mold of a Western state, there was no fundamental reorientation of its underlying political theory. As a result, the Myanmar which appeared from the ashes of the colonial era has emerged as brackish mixture between the old ways and the new. It has created for itself a governmental structure which in form mirrors that of Western states, the functions of government divided across separate yet related institutions and whose decisions are informed (at least broadly) by the populace. Yet though it apes the West in its structure, it does not in its political theory. As Myanmar has become increasingly democratic, it has also become clear that its government has become increasingly Buddhist. While struggles in the early years of democratization are not unique to Myanmar, it is the nature of these struggles which makes the situation so alarming. It is not simply a matter of difficulty in ensuring free and fair elections. The policies of the democratically elected Burmese regimes, despite their liberal rhetoric in the push for democratization, have made clear that their allegiances are not with maintaining a liberal democracy, but instead with ensuring the maintenance and standing of Burmese Buddhist



practice. Though Myanmar has taken on Western forms, it has rejected the political theory which underlies them. There is seemingly no concern for Western conceptions such as minority rights. This is not because the Burmese are simply cold-hearted, but because their understanding of democracy is not founded on a grounding which gives privilege to such things. To be Burmese is to be Buddhist. According, a Burmese democracy is democracy which privileges the teachings and standing of Buddhism.

For decades, proponents of Burmese independence in Myanmar (chief among them, Aung San Suu Kyi) were promoted and supported by allies in the liberal West which understood the Burmese as partaking in similar struggles to the democratic movements in the West, then characterized by the freedom movements of the Soviet satellite states. They understood themselves as taking part in a shared project. This project, while well intentioned, fundamentally misunderstood its own aims. By placing democratization as its goal, it failed to adequately take into account the fact that democratization broadly construed is not necessarily a laudable goal. The understanding of democracy by its Western proponents was understood, without any apparent thought or reservation, as liberal democracy, which employs democratic forms and principles to a larger end of supporting basic rights. There was an unfounded assumption that the introduction of democracy to a context like that of Myanmar would equally entail this liberal foundation. Failing to account for the differences in their political traditions, or perhaps mistakenly believing that the end of history had rendered any differences moot, liberals in the West now stand in shock at what the era of democracy in Myanmar has wrought. They view themselves as betrayed by Burmese political actors like Aung San Suu Kyi, who they viewed as obvious allies. But Aung San Suu Kyi is not a hypocrite. She is simply not a Western political actor, as many in the West positioned her. Though she may well understand the principles of

Western political theory, her sympathies to them are not due to acceptance of their truths generally but in their value to her own, Myanmar's own, project. The blame here does not belong to the Burmese. It belongs to those in the West who mistook simple liberal rhetoric for a well-founded philosophic alliance. While it may be possible to find workable philosophic cognates to the idea of Western rights from within the Buddhist tradition, there is a danger in assuming that the ingredients are the same in both the name brand and the generic, and that any differences can easily be explained away should be found they. There are undoubtedly justifications for actions serving to maintain human dignity and respecting what in the Western tradition would be called "rights" from within the teachings of the Buddha. But it must be firmly understood that these justifications are first and foremost Buddhist, and as such much be understood not as political principles but as religious claims. Buddhist political theory, from its earliest tenets, places the political as decidedly secondary to the spiritual. Any political life which is founded on these principles must by necessity orient itself accordingly. The underlying truth claims of a Buddhist regime are compelling to Buddhist practitioners not because they speak to some inherent understanding from within their tradition about the fundamental equality of man, but because of their standing as aligned with the *dhamma*. While a political life can be founded from these teaching, the claims of this regime are not meant to, nor should be understood to, speak to broad universal principles of abstract reason, as is the case with the Western state. A political life which is not simply founded on Buddhist principles, but ran with an understanding of the necessity of Buddhist truth as its driving force, is a fundamentally different beast than the secular Western state, which replaces these myths with its own myths of a secular civil religion. While it is reasonable to ask why one myth is inherently different or better than the other, the answer is likely clear to a Rohingya Muslim in Myanmar. The political condition in contemporary

Myanmar is not an accident. It is a result of a tradition grounded in traditional Buddhist political theory being given the tools and structures of a modern Western state devoid of the principles which undergirded their creation. While the actions of the Burmese are not a necessary and unavoidable consequence of this condition, they equally should not be explained away as merely the result of bad actors. In this instance, the actors are only bad in relation to the expectations we in the West have placed upon them, not in relation to the goals and principles to which they themselves are beholden.

Since the era of British colonialism, Myanmar has been an example of the Western nation-state imposed onto an underlying Buddhist condition. With this imposition came the fundamentally Western understanding that order is necessarily a function of the political, antithetical to the Buddhist understanding of societal and moral order as existing prior and apart from political life. The time since Burmese independence has been one of a country slowly trying to reconcile these competing claims, maintaining the basic form of a Western state, attempting to recover its traditional Buddhist moral order, and finally creating a political condition in which the two can simultaneously coexist.

The politics of Myanmar were once defined by a Buddhist monarchy which would help shape and maintain the moral landscape of the country through his political action and his strong connection with the *sangha*. This political order is now gone, and with it the direct connection between political life and the wisdom of the Buddhist moral order. The movement into the era of Burmese democracy opens the question of if and how this moral order, which views itself as primary over the existence of political life, can be reconciled within a Western-style nation-state. Who or what can serve as the moral leader of a Burmese democracy? More pointedly, can a truly Burmese democracy also be a truly liberal democracy?

The moral justification used by Burmese Buddhist kings to explain away how they could partake in the contradictory acts of maintaining Buddhist faith and also serving as a political actor was that the king only came to his position due to a glut of *kammic* benefit and in that regard could afford the mark on his record. Viewed in this light, the actions of members of organizations like the Ma Ba Tha take on a new light. They, much like the Buddhist kings of old, position themselves as partaking in *kammically* damaging acts, but acts which are nonetheless wholly necessary to maintain the morality of their country. The actions of kings in Myanmar have not disappeared, they have simply been democratized, diffused into the hands of political actors which may lack a deep *kammic* inventory but are willing to suffer the black mark nonetheless. There has been no fundamental political or philosophic reorientation in Myanmar, and the old guard differs from the new only as a matter of political institutions.

There are deep implications regarding this essential connection between Buddhist practice and Burmese political action as it relates to the possibility of an integration of Myanmar into the sphere of Western political life. The seemingly unseverable connection between the Buddhist moral order and political life, the latter only being defined in light of the former, negates any real possibility of a pluralistic society constructed to allow for tolerance and free human action. Assuming that a formal institutional separation of church and state is even possible to maintain, the combination of a deeply homogenous society founded around a religious code with a lack of safeguards, philosophic or institutional, to protect minority rights and tasked by its religious ethos to harness the political realm to the end of promoting its version of religious salvation ensures that oppression is equally likely to result as a matter of democratic consensus.

The answer to this condition cannot come from within the Buddhist realm. The attempt to found a religio-political condition based on Buddhist political principles, even one based on a liberal-minded, modern understanding of Buddhism as Hiroko Kawanami argues was the case with the political action of U Nu, has led to the condition of religious persecution that we see among the Rohingya, where the demands of Buddhism (however perverted one may argue its interpretation might be) have been allowed to trump the basic protections expected in a liberal society. If this understanding of proper political action is deemed acceptable, even tacitly, by someone as sympathetic to Western concerns as Aung San Suu Kyi, there can be no reasonable expectation that Buddhism is able to serve as a sufficient barrier for the basic protections of rights deemed necessary by Western society. The issue here is not that a perverted interpretation of Buddhist principles was allowed to take hold at the expense of a proper understanding of Buddhist truths, but that either was given standing as the dominant force within political life at all. This is not a matter of harnessing the “right” Buddhist understanding as a guide to political life, it is a matter of needing to divorce Buddhist practice from the powers of the state.

The foundations of the Western state are premised, from their origins in Hobbes, in a placement of the power of political sovereignty as the highest order power in society. This understanding was further developed in subsequent liberal thought through the conception of the state as the focal point of a civil religion, designed to foster a unity among the citizenry by lessening the particulars bond which would otherwise divide them. Respect for a pluralistic condition is not an *a priori* assumption of this understanding but a philosophic consequence which follows it. Respect for minority rights is not something which can simply be demanded of or mandated to a political condition which lacks the philosophic assumptions necessary to justify its value. A modern Buddhist state, insofar as it maintains the standards of traditional Buddhist

political theory, cannot be reconciled with a civil religion because this content is already provided by the truth claims of Buddhist teachings. Further, it is never in need of a civil religion because as it fails to abide by the Western assumption of the primacy of political life as a driver of the moral order.

The foundations and truth claims of a Buddhist political order can never be available to all members of a society if that society also values free choice. Its groundings are meaningful only to those who accept the truth claims of Buddhist teachings. A Buddhist political order is only possible in a religiously Buddhist homogenous society. It can only truly maintain the standards of liberal rights protections when there are no groups whose rights it can offend, which is to say merely by coincidence. Yet it needn't rise to the level of genocide and violence, as something as fundamental to the liberal West as the protections of free speech and expression can equally easily be curtailed by the logic of its necessity for the maintenance and protection of Buddhist morality. This, coupled with the Burmese obsession with an identity defined by Buddhist heritage, ensures that any notion of liberty and truly free human action can never be expected. Liberal political action is not incompatible with Buddhist action. But their overlap, however frequent it may be, is coincidental, not the result of a shared project.

## CHAPTER SIX: SOCIALLY-ENGAGED BUDDHISM

In May of 2015, a group of one hundred twenty-five politically active American Buddhist practitioners convened and met with officials from the White House and the U.S. Department of State.<sup>1</sup> Predominantly Western, predominantly white, and predominantly liberal in their politics, this group sought not so much to provide guidance in policy but to seek answers to more basic questions such as “what even constitutes a Buddhist political agenda in contemporary American life?”<sup>2</sup> This meeting, a heretofore unprecedented intermingling of American Buddhist political action and practical political authority, not only represents forward movement and progress for the American Buddhist community but also brings into focus the way in which a return to traditional Buddhist values on the subject of politics is either impossible or unnecessary in contemporary political life.

Though the circumstances are decidedly different and the stakes decidedly lower, this coming together of the Buddhist community (understood as the contemporary American *sangha*) and those with political power highlights the particular differences not only of the modern *sangha* compared to its traditional counterpart but also the ways in which it is possible and necessary for it to interact with political power in a contemporary setting. The meeting, though interesting, was simply perfunctory and no meaningful policy was crafted nor was expected to be crafted there. But this meeting also raises the question of the necessity of a meaningful relationship between the *sangha* and political authority in a political context like modern America. At least in theory, the nature of democracy is such that the *sangha* is in fact consulted

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<sup>1</sup> Boorstein, Michelle. “A Political Awakening for Buddhists? 125 U.S. Buddhist Leaders to Meet at the White House.” *The Washington Post* 12 May 2015. Web. 12 December 2018.

<sup>2</sup> This group, referring to themselves as “Bringing Our Voices to the Public Square and Compassionate Action to Our Communities,” identified as 66% Democratic or leaning-Democratic. This is in line with James Coleman’s (2002, pg 193) numbers, which found that 60% of American Buddhists identify as Democrat, 9.9% identify as Green, and 2.6% identify as Republican.

and present in political decision making, albeit with its numbers drowned out by the pluralistic mixture of other interests in society. Its positions are not given special treatment, but they are given equal treatment all the same. In this regard, perfunctory meetings are about all that should rightly be expected.

That Buddhist practitioners would be treated as would any other interest group in American political life seems an obvious notion, but its repercussions are more complicated as a matter of Buddhist political theory. As given in the teachings of the Buddha in the Pāli texts, political action (and private political action in particular) is seen as a dirty act and one which is damaging to the process of enlightenment. Ruling is left to virtuous kings, who themselves have such personal characteristics that they are able to withstand the damaging effects of political life. What political action there is for Buddhist practitioners at large is even still contained to members of the formal, monasterial *sangha*, who while not partaking in political activity themselves nonetheless help to inform kings. This system breaks down in any numbers of obvious ways in a contemporary political setting— there are no kings and the rulers we have are not chosen for their virtue but for their supposed ability to rule in the name of the people; in the Western context, there is no meaningful monasterial *sangha* and what *sangha* there is is more broadly understood as the simple public collective of Buddhist practitioners, lay or otherwise; and finally, the proposed end of political life is not Buddhist virtue (or religious virtue of any sort) but of a respect for liberal values such as equality and liberty.

The question for a contemporary Western Buddhist, and the particular question sought to be answered by the Buddhist meeting in 2015, is precisely how a Buddhist is meant to act simultaneously as both a spiritual being seeking enlightenment and a political animal seeking to fulfill liberal values. This is not a matter of policy (in this regard at least, most contemporary



American Buddhists seem to favor a progressive agenda), but rather a question of what proper political action should look like in this condition, if political action is even allowed or warranted at all. This is the primary question facing the socially-engaged Buddhist movement.

In Myanmar we see the difficulties of a historically Buddhist condition attempting to reconcile itself with the understandings and expectations of the modern world. Thrust into a situation where its traditional political practices are forced into conflict with the politics of the modern West, Myanmar represents one facet of the process of adaptation being undertaken by Buddhism and Buddhist political thought in the twenty-first century. While Myanmar is an example of a historically Buddhist condition seeking to adapt to the pressures of the principles and expectations of the West, this sort of adaptation only tells half of the story. As much as the Buddhist world has begun to be shaped by the West, the teachings and practices of the Buddhist world have begun to take hold in and shape the West itself. Whereas Myanmar demonstrates the workings of a Buddhist regime born from Buddhist soil, Buddhist political movements in the West allow us some insight into how Buddhist politics can come to express itself from within the context of a pre-existing political condition which is not necessarily inclined towards the premises of its understanding of politics and political life. The most explicit expression of this adaptation is found in the rise of the practice of socially-engaged Buddhism, a mixture of Buddhist ethics and Western political advocacy which is quite dissimilar to the political foundations of ancient Buddhist practice as expressed in the Pāli Canon. This project has seen a sharp rise with the recent explosion of the Mindfulness movement in the Western mind, capitalizing on a renewed interest in the principles underlying Buddhist practice. Whereas the Mindfulness movement posits Buddhist principles as a means to correct the distortions of the mind due to the effects of modern pressures, socially-engaged Buddhist thought seeks to apply

this method as a means to correct society. Though the projects are not synonymous, as socially-engaged Buddhist presents itself as an explicitly political enterprise as opposed to the more personal-minded Mindfulness movement, their concurrent rise nonetheless serves as an indication that the larger project of an opening of the Western mind to Buddhist principles and teachings is beginning to show some practical effects. No longer contained to academia and fringe religious practice, Buddhism, or at least the principles therein, is beginning to have some mainstream recognition in the West, and particularly in the United States.

This rise introduces some concurrent dangers however, as a rise in mainstream popularity also brings with it the mainstreaming of traditional Buddhist principles to make them more palatable to Western practice. In the case of Buddhism, which rests itself on philosophic premises which are so foreign to the Western experience as to be almost unintelligible in their traditional form, this mainstreaming runs the risk of fundamentally bastardizing the original motivating aspects which make Buddhist thought so appealing to the West in an age of apparent spiritual and philosophic malaise. Adaptation runs the danger of becoming adulteration, wherein those aspects which are unique become so misshapen in the process of fitting themselves into a new box that they no longer hold the value they once did. This is an inherent danger in the rise of the new politically minded socially-engaged Buddhism.

Though its origins are in the homelands of Buddhist practice and its tenets mostly aligned with mainstream Buddhist stances, at its core engaged Buddhism is an example of the Western mind seeking to make Buddhism something it is not, namely a secular phenomenon rather than a system of religious truth claims. While the risks of a project of this sort are low with something like Sam Harris' attempt to examine the claims of Buddhism as a function of modern neuroscience, the stakes are decidedly higher in the realm of politics. Obfuscating religious

claims in the attempt to secularize them runs the risk of corrupting the underlying principles of Buddhist thought, but much more importantly it runs the risk of creating a foundation and justification for a theological politics which is able to successfully masquerade as a seemingly pluralistic and secular political order. The fundamental principles set forth by proponents of socially-engaged Buddhist thought (broadly speaking, a commitment to social and economic justice) are themselves compatible with Western political life. But we cannot rightly view or understand these political commitments outside of their philosophic origins. From a Western perspective, these positions are justified as an outgrowth of liberalism. They are understood as a facet of a philosophic privileging of the individual as the primary unit of political life and a subsequent respect for this individual's standing in the political sphere. This is not the case for those who wish to forward these positions as a function of socially-engaged Buddhist thought. Instead, here these principles (as would rightly be expected) are justified in terms of Buddhist thought, primarily in relation to the necessity of a Buddhist practitioners to exhibit compassion to all sentient beings. Though socially-engaged Buddhist thought and contemporary liberalism arrive at much the same political conclusions, they are nonetheless grounding their belief on wildly differing premises. In this particular regard, the two are natural allies, and it is thus not surprising to see such support for socially-engaged Buddhist thought among many liberal-minded Western thinkers. But what is lost in this rush to alliance is the fact that Buddhist compassion, as liberal as it may be in its ends, is nonetheless an explicitly religious doctrine. Its standing cannot be separated from its origins. Accordingly, a politics crafted from socially-engaged Buddhist thought is inherently illiberal, as it is premised inextricably on a claim of religious particularism. Though Buddhist practice may claim the universality of compassion, this claim is only compelling to the Buddhist practitioner. When an engaged Buddhist speaks of

compassion, we must understand that this is not simply compassion as a function of empathy or pity the way it might be used in common parlance or within the Western tradition of political thought by Rousseau or Tocqueville.<sup>3</sup> Buddhist compassion (*karuṇā*) is a particular religious term with particular religious connotations and meaning, and its value is not justified by engaged Buddhists as a function of its political worth but of its use as a means to further the greater Buddhist project. It is not a secular claim, and thus by necessity is inherently exclusionary and by extension non-pluralistic.

Though a Buddhist politics founded on *karuṇā* presents itself as universal, this universality could only be achieved as a political reality in a condition wherein the entirety of the political population took this religious claim seriously, either by accident or by force. The former of these, the alignment of a nation to a particular religious stance by circumstance of historical accident, is the fundamental issue at hand as it regards Myanmar and its transition into liberalism. The problems, detailed in Chapter Five, are in the unsustainability of this sort of circumstance in a pluralistic condition. If a condition is truly pluralistic, there will be an inevitable clash (physical or philosophic) between the religious stance on which the regime is premised and the free action of those over which it rules. But these are the problems of a religious condition moving towards liberalism. The danger of a seemingly liberal politics built around the principles of a movement like socially-engaged Buddhism is grounded in the possibility that the general social agreement on the validity of Buddhist teachings traditionally found in the historical accident of Myanmar would instead have to be instituted by force in a condition such as the West, which begins from a position of heterogeneity.

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of compassion, and its ultimate inadequacy as a political principle, see: Orwin, Clifford. "Compassion." *The American Scholar* 49:309-333. 1980.

If general spiritual consensus is necessary to ground a politics based on a fundamentally religious claim, where this consensus is found lacking there must be an ever-present concern that this consensus will be viewed as so important that it must be manufactured. While it would be foolish to claim that proponents of socially-engaged themselves are seeking to forcibly convert Western citizens into Buddhists and Western society into a Buddhist condition, the scars of the rise of political religions such as fascism and communism in the twentieth century demonstrate precisely how important it is to not lose sight of the dangers of a politics which mandate intellectual homogeneity and consensus to maintain its standing. However well-intentioned the political goals of socially-engaged Buddhism may be, it must not be conflated or confused with a secular project. Though its ends are liberal, its means are not. Its groundings must be fully examined if we are to rightly judge its standing.

### **The Origins and Principles of Engaged Buddhism**

At its core, socially-engaged Buddhism (also simply called engaged Buddhism) is built on bringing together the principles of Buddhist practice and Western political action. As its name implies, socially-engaged Buddhism understands itself as an attempt to distance Buddhist practice from its traditional heritage as an individually-focused attempt to achieve enlightenment in favor of a practice of social engagement undertaken in light of Buddhist principles. Whereas traditional Buddhist practice would simply seek to foster an understanding within an individual practitioner of the necessity of principles such as compassion and non-violence in the hope that this understanding will lead that individual to enlightenment, engaged Buddhism posits that if one has a true and proper understanding of these principles he or she will further see the necessity of placing these principles into action. One cannot see the truth of compassion, for example, without also seeing the corollary necessity of acting in line with the requirements of

compassion. Enlightenment is not an intellectual activity, at least not in full. Proper enlightenment begins with intellectual (be it rational or arational) activity, but only is properly fulfilled in the subsequent actualization of this comprehension.

Though there are a number of organizations which help to further the ideas and causes of engaged Buddhism, there is no proper central authority which overlooks engaged Buddhism nor is there a central creed or series of beliefs which one is mandated to adopt. While its origins lie most clearly in the Mahāyāna *Thien* (Vietnamese school of Zen) thought of Thích Nhất Hạnh, its proponents are spread across Buddhist traditions, such as the Tibetan thought of the current Dalai Lama or the more traditional Theravāda thought of Aung San Suu Kyi and Sulak Sivaraksa.<sup>4</sup> The term itself originates from the thought of Thích Nhất Hạnh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, in the mid-1960s. He worked to develop this novel and modern understanding of Buddhist practice not as an intellectual exercise, but as a practical response to the horrors engulfing his country during the period of European and subsequent American occupation. The ultimate catalyst of Thích Nhất Hạnh's thought is typically understood as the self-immolation of Thích Quảng Đức in the streets of Saigon, captured in the infamous photo which spread quickly among Western news sources. Throughout the early period American engagement in Vietnam Nhất Hạnh had left the country, teaching Buddhism and comparative religion at Columbia University.<sup>5</sup> During this period, serving as an advocate for his native country, Nhất Hạnh began lecturing at various American universities and engaging in correspondence with Western counterparts in social action, such as Martin Luther King Jr.

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<sup>4</sup> Queen (2000, pgs 19-20) argues against the validity of these distinctions, particularly in relation to engaged Buddhism, describing them as “artificial taxonomies” which are more useful in helping to understand the historical evolution of Buddhist thought than in helping to understanding its relationship to the modern world.

<sup>5</sup> Batchelor, Stephen. *The Awakening of the West: The Encounter of Buddhism and Western Culture*. Parallax Press, 1994. Pg 357.

The core tenets of engaged Buddhism are laid out by Nhất Hạnh in his book-length essay *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism*. At their core, these precepts do not differ fundamentally from the ancient principles set forth by the Buddha, emphasizing the role of suffering in human existence.<sup>6</sup> In practice, the principles of Nhất Hạnh's engaged Buddhism do not seek to supersede the Buddha's teaching with the Four Noble Truths, but instead present themselves as a necessary though unstated addendum to these teachings. Whereas the Buddha concluded that now knowing the cause of suffering we are able to move beyond it through the cultivation of the wisdom necessary for enlightenment, Nhất Hạnh believes that this knowledge creates in the Buddhist practitioner a necessary responsibility to use this knowledge to a social end. Section Four of his Mindfulness program for engaged Buddhist practice states the following: "Aware that looking deeply at the nature of suffering can help us develop compassion and find ways out of suffering, we are determined not to avoid or close our eyes before suffering."<sup>7</sup> This passage exhibits the core of Nhất Hạnh's project. An awareness of suffering and how to alleviate it through the actions of the Eight-fold Path is not sufficient. We need the knowledge of the Four Noble Truths, but having grasped this knowledge we need also to move beyond it. Suffering should not merely draw our attention to our *own* cravings, it should allow us to empathize and feel compassion for the suffering caused by cravings in others.<sup>8</sup> In Nhất Hạnh's

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<sup>6</sup> Though Nhất Hạnh emphasizes the universality of engaged Buddhism within the context of all Buddhist traditions, claiming that his presentation of Buddhist thought has no basic texts or canon and draws inspiration "from the essence of Buddhadharma [the truth of the teachings of the Buddha] as found in all sutras" (Thích Nhất Hạnh 1987, pg 9), later scholars have tried to trace engaged Buddhist practices back into the lineage of ancient and traditional Buddhist thought. Robert A.F. Thurman (1988) draws on the Edicts of Asoka and the teachings of second century C.E. Buddhist scholar Nagarjuna to find precedent for social policies promoting religious pluralism, widespread education, and even a system of publically-funded welfare programs. He credits Nagarjuna with laying out the case for both socially-supported universal healthcare and a welfare state complete with price controls of public necessities. Christopher S. Queen (1996) and Walpola Rahula (1988) also note the frequent citing of the Pāli texts by proponents of engaged Buddhism.

<sup>7</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh. *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism*. Edited by Fred Eppsteiner, Parallax Press, 1998. Pg 18.

<sup>8</sup> Vreeland, Nicholas. *An Open Heart: Practicing Compassion in Everyday Life*. Little, Brown, and Company, 2001. Pgs 91-93.

formulation, if we rightly understand suffering, we are compelled not to simply seek release for ourselves but instead are compelled to seek release for all beings. Compassion then in the thought of engaged Buddhism is only intelligible as a function of religious practice and its justification as man's driving force rests on its value to the Buddhist soteriological project.

This particular understanding of compassion as driving action is the introduction of the political element into engaged Buddhist thought. Unlike Western conceptions of political life, which understand it as either natural or as emerging through shared agreement, Nhất Hạnh's Buddhism premises the emergence of political obligation through a spiritual realization of the interconnectedness of existence and the requirement of one who comes to this realization to set aside personal gain for public benefit. Compassion is the foundation of politics. Engaged Buddhism then is a theology of liberation, not simply in the form of personal spiritual liberation as with the traditional teachings of the Buddha, but one of social liberation in line with similar theological movements in the West.<sup>9</sup> Christopher S. Queen describes this distinction as a "profound change in Buddhist soteriology- from a highly personal and other-worldly notion of liberation to a social, economic, this-worldly liberation."<sup>10</sup>

While the fluid nature of Buddhist practice renders it unnecessary to question the validity of engaged Buddhism as a means of proper Buddhist practice, as a function of political theory (and particularly of comparative political theory) it is necessary to examine the nature of the new-found emphasis on political action within engaged Buddhism. How does a religious practice justify moving from viewing political action as marring one's being to promoting a slogan of "Educate! Agitate! Organize!"<sup>11</sup> In the case of engaged Buddhism, the basis is three-

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<sup>9</sup> Queen, Christopher S., and Sallie B. King, editors. *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*. State University of New York Press, 2011. Pg x.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, Pg 10.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, Pg 5.



fold, consisting of (1) an acknowledgement of the requirements placed on a Buddhist practitioner by the necessities of compassion, (2) a secularization and rationalization of Buddhist symbology and practice, and (3) politicization through the process of the Westernization of Buddhist concepts and language. Through a combination of these three factors, engaged Buddhism has been able to reorient traditional Buddhist understandings of liberation into a system of thought which Queen describes as “unprecedented, and thus tantamount to a new chapter in the history of the tradition” on par historically with the three major Buddhist traditions (Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna ) which preceded it.<sup>12</sup>

### **Compassion**

As a matter of religious doctrine, the characteristic of engaged Buddhism which most clearly differs from its traditional counterparts is its emphasis on the consequences of compassion. The concept of Buddhist compassion (*karuṇā*) is found throughout the early texts of the Buddhist tradition. Its importance is further emphasized in the later Mahāyānan conception of the *bodhisattva*, or one who elects to direct their life in the direction of Buddhahood and in some instances, having achieved enlightenment, chooses to forestall release from *samsāra* in order to help other achieve the same, done so in the name of wisdom and compassion.<sup>13</sup> Engaged Buddhist thought does not deny these understandings of compassion, but it does view them as ultimately insufficient or at least not fully realized.

Socially-engaged Buddhism’s presentation of compassion mirrors that of the Mahāyānan *bodhisattva* (Thích Nhất Hạnh was himself a disciple of a branch of this school, and makes

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<sup>12</sup> Queen, Christopher S., editor. *Engaged Buddhism in the West*. Wisdom Publications, 2000. Pg 1.

<sup>13</sup> Ichikawa, Akira. “Compassionate Politics: Buddhist Concepts as Political Guide.” *Journal of Church and State* 21: 247-263. 1979. Pg 248. See also: Leighton, Taigen Daniel. *Faces of Compassion: Classic Bodhisattva Archetypes and Their Modern Expression*. Wisdom Publications, 2003.

frequently allusion to its concepts in his writing) but extends its logic further, going beyond viewing it as simply creating an obligation to help further others in the project of individual enlightenment and instead moving it into the realm of social action. Traditional understandings of the *bodhisattva* present him as driven by the dual forces of compassion and wisdom to help cultivate in others the necessary conditions to help achieve enlightenment. Nhất Hạnh views this as insufficient given the conditions of the modern era. Speaking of compassion in *Interbeing*, he writes, “When a village is being bombed and children and adults are suffering from wounds and death, can a Buddhist sit still in his unbombed temple? If he has wisdom and compassion, he will find ways to practice Buddhism *while* helping other people.”<sup>14</sup>

Nhất Hạnh’s quote is interesting not solely because of his stance that compassion breeds a necessity for action, but in his assessment of what action is apparently required. He says explicitly that in a condition such as this a Buddhist must practice Buddhism while also helping those around him. The clear implication here is that the ways of the old *bodhisattva*, the Buddhist sitting still in his unbombed temple, are insufficient. Further, Nhất Hạnh seems to maintain that this action, the traditional Buddhist ideal of compassionate action, isn’t really action at all. The old ways of the *bodhisattva* are clearly now insufficient, if they were truly ever sufficient at all. Yet this does not mean that modern conditions have relieved Buddhists of the requirements of compassionate action, it has simply made clear the true nature of their obligation. This necessity for action is emphasized by David Brazier in his book, *The New Buddhism*. Writing on the traditional relationship between wisdom and compassion in driving the actions of Buddhist practitioners, Brazier emphasizes that though they are complimentary they are not equal. “Compassion power is, therefore,” he writes,

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<sup>14</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh (1998), Pg 31.

the highest value in Buddhism. Compassion means concern about the afflictions suffered by others. Compassion needs wisdom in order to be effective. Compassion is highest, however. Wisdom is the servant of compassion. Compassion tells us what needs to be done and wisdom tells us how to do it. Buddhism is not about disappearing into a magical wisdom world. It is surely about doing something real.<sup>15</sup>

With this passage we can see a few interesting facets of the “new Buddhism.” First is the necessary connection between compassion and social action in engaged Buddhist thought.

Throughout his writing, echoing both Thích Nhất Hạnh and the Dalai Lama, Brazier speaks of compassion not as a psychological stance or sensibility, but instead as itself a type of action. The realization of compassion is such that it bears upon the recipient a burden of compassionate action. The two are inseparable, as to truly feel compassion is to acknowledge its incumbent burden. “Compassion demands of us,” he claims, “that we step out of our old identity, however comfortable, and make ourselves available for a greater work.”<sup>16</sup> This language is mirrored by Stephen Batchelor, who writes that “compassion demands that one tackle the root societal causes of this suffering.”<sup>17</sup> In this regard it is important not *what* compassion demands of us specifically, but that it necessarily makes demands of us at all. Compassion contains action, even if it be potential rather than kinetic. It may not be surprising then to find Queen refer to these contemporary presentations of Buddhism as an “energetic engagement” with the realities of the modern world.<sup>18</sup>

But what Brazier’s passage further reveals is a reorientation of the traditional Buddhist presentation of the relationship between wisdom and compassion. Traditional presentations view the two as intertwined and balanced, offering privilege to neither. Here Brazier creates a

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<sup>15</sup> Brazier, David. *The New Buddhism*. St. Martin’s Griffin, 2002. Pgs 24-25.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, Pg 24.

<sup>17</sup> Batchelor (1994), Pg 365.

<sup>18</sup> Queen and King (2011), Pg ix.

hierarchy of their value as means of proper Buddhist action. Wisdom, he claims, is the servant of compassion. Wisdom itself cannot even tell you what needs to be done, this is reserved to compassion. As Brazier makes clear, engaged Buddhist practice, by placing a preeminence on the value of action as the proper means to observe compassion, devalues the role of wisdom at its expense. Proper action (understood as action guided by compassion) is not based on a reasoned assessment nor is it predicated on acting in line with some objective standard. Proper action is dictated by acting in line with compassion, as derived from a condition of mindfulness and attentiveness to the interconnectivity of being. But, more importantly, given the nature of compassion as inherently tied to action, it is also the case that engaged Buddhism privileges the realm of activity (which is to say the realm of politics and the political) over the realms of contemplation and religious doctrine. By intertwining personal enlightenment with social goods and ends, engaged Buddhism socializes and politicizes heretofore private Buddhist practice.

### **Secularization**

By socializing Buddhism's ends, engaged Buddhism also manages to fundamentally alter traditional understandings of Buddhist community. We see this first in the modern expansion of the understanding of who or what constitutes the *sangha*. Originally, this title was reserved for the formal community of Buddhist monks. In modernity, this understanding has been transformed, with the *sangha* instead being understood as the totality of Buddhist practitioners. The importance of community is not lessened in engaged Buddhist thought, but the relationship of the individuals within it is altered. One result of this privileging of compassionate action over wisdom is the commensurate lowering of the standing of monastic practice over personal, private practice. Within engaged Buddhist practice, this equalization is made explicit. James William Coleman, writing on this reconfiguration, claims that "In the new Buddhism, this fundamental

distinction between monk and layperson is almost wiped away. Although some people live a more monastic lifestyle while others live as householders, the pursuit of liberation is common to them all.”<sup>19</sup> He goes on to conclude that “In one sense everyone is a kind of monk, and in another no one is.”<sup>20</sup>

While Coleman attributes this reorientation to the difficulty of selling Westerners on notions such as monastic celibacy, his insistence on practical causes obscures a more philosophic reality. The movement of Buddhist practice from a monastic setting to a condition of secularization is not strictly a Western development. Queen, following Gananath Obeyesekere’s study of religious development in Sri Lanka, notes the importance of the secularization of Buddhist religious symbols to the Buddhist liberation movements through the Eastern world. He finds three key elements which have contributed to this change,

1. The emergence of a leader who provides a charter for change, a model for emulation, and becomes a symbol of the new order
2. Role shifts, specifically a this-worldly asceticism directed to political and social goals
3. ‘a rationalization of the religious life’ involving the discrediting of folk religious elements (such as theistic devotionism or ritualism) and an emphasis on mental and moral development through education and virtuous living<sup>21</sup>

With the development of engaged Buddhism in the West, it is this last factor which has proven most salient. Concurrently and complementary to the rise of engaged Buddhism has been a movement among certain Western Buddhists to decouple Buddhist practice from its metaphysical and cosmological origins in Eastern thought. This movement, dubbed secular Buddhism, has seen moderate success as an intellectual exercise but has proven wildly popular in

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<sup>19</sup> Coleman (2002), Pg 13.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., Pg 14.

<sup>21</sup> Queen and King (2011), Pg 7.

its mainstream repackaging as mindfulness and the Mindfulness Movement. Popularized and defended most ardently by Stephen Batchelor in works such as *Confessions of a Buddhist Atheist*, *After Buddhism*, and *Buddhism Without Beliefs*, secular Buddhism (unlike much of greater engaged Buddhist thought) understands and presents itself as a direct response and reimagining of traditional Buddhist practice in light of modern concerns and beliefs. These changes run so deep that Batchelor, in describing this sort of Buddhist practice, feels comfortable in claiming that “The kind of Buddhism sought out by [these contemporary Western practitioners] on the basis of their practice of mindfulness may have little if anything to do with Buddhism as it is traditionally understood and presented.”<sup>22</sup>

For his part, Batchelor does not view these wild transformations and reorientations as a negative, drawing on Buddhist history as evidence that these changes are not only wholly with precedent but also not against the Buddhist understanding of truth as that which leads someone to the appropriate end rather than as an objective standard. Comparing his presentation of secular Buddhism to past traditions, he writes that “Just as the term ‘Tibetan Buddhism’ describes the kind of dharma that evolved in Tibet, so, in its broadest sense, would ‘secular Buddhism’ describe the kind of dharma that is evolving in this secular age.”<sup>23</sup>

These changes are necessary according to Batchelor not because traditional Buddhist teachings are not “true” objectively, but because they are no longer persuasive. Insofar as the teachings and metaphysics of ancient Buddhist practice no longer convince modern practitioners (and practitioners in the West in particular) they should and perhaps must be abandoned, as they have ceased to help to lead practitioners towards the *dhamma*. This pragmatism, which is itself

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<sup>22</sup> Batchelor, Stephen. “A Secular Buddhism.” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 13: 87-107. 2012. Pg 89.

<sup>23</sup> Batchelor, Stephen. *After Buddhism: Rethinking the Dharma for a Secular Age*. Yale University Press, 2016. Pg 19.

well-grounded in traditional Buddhist practice, leads Batchelor to conclude that accessibility is more important than metaphysical consistency. Speaking to those who would consider this a process of distortion rather than of adaptation, Batchelor offers the following,

So embedded is this Indian soteriological framework in Buddhism that Buddhists might find it unintelligible that one would even consider questioning it. For to dispense with such key doctrines as rebirth, the law of kamma, and liberation from the cycle of birth and death would surely undermine the entire edifice of Buddhism itself. Yet for those who have grown up outside of Indian culture, who feel at home in a modernity informed by the natural sciences, to then be told that one cannot “really” practise the dharma unless one adheres to the tenets of ancient Indian soteriology makes little sense. The reason people can no longer accept these beliefs need not be because they reject them as false, but because such views are too much at variance with everything else they know and believe about the nature of themselves and the world. They simply do not work anymore, and the intellectual gymnastics one needs to perform to make them work seem casuistic and, for many, unpersuasive. They are metaphysical beliefs, in that (like belief in God) they can neither be convincingly demonstrated nor refuted. One has to take them on trust, albeit with as much reason and empirical evidence that one can muster to back them up...

... At first sight, it would seem that the challenge facing the dharma as it enters modernity would be to write another software program, e.g. “Vipassana,” “Soka Gakkai” or “Shambhala Buddhism,” that would modify a traditional form of Buddhism in order to address more adequately the needs of contemporary practitioners. However, the cultural divide that separates traditional Buddhism from modernity is so great that this may not be enough. It might well be necessary to rewrite the operating system itself, resulting in what we could call “Buddhism 2.0.”<sup>24</sup>

It is an oddity of Buddhist history and practice that radical change in a tradition is not itself considered a radical action. Though Batchelor is calling for a project that arguably exceeds any other reformulation that has come before it, the notion that *dhamma* and truth are one in the same

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<sup>24</sup> Batchelor (2012), Pgs 89-90.

and thus whatever leads to *dhamma* is by this fact also true ensures that his project is at the very least not heretical.

The final stage of the construction of a viable Buddhism 2.0 is to decide precisely what of the old Buddhism will remain and what will replace the refuse. This facet of the project is still in its relative infancy, and by its nature can only be accomplished as a function of public Buddhist practice as it organically evolves, seeing what is accepted by practitioners and what is not. Batchelor offers a bare minimum set of functions that this refounded Buddhism would have to meet, finding that “it would need to be founded upon canonical source texts, be able to offer a coherent interpretation of key practices, doctrines and ethical precepts, and provide a sufficiently rich and integrated theoretical model of the dharma to serve as the basis for a flourishing human existence.”<sup>25</sup> What this would look like in Western practice, or how it would significantly differ from traditional practice is as of yet unclear. Batchelor’s project, however, has seen some successes in recent years, albeit in a somewhat modified form. Language from sociology departments to pop culture has come to be dominated with talk of “mindfulness,” or the attempt to live in line with a recognition of the presence of the now and an awareness of our actions.<sup>26</sup> Though much of this mainstream talk comes to nothing more than pop-psychology drivel, the language of mindfulness itself is common throughout the writing of engaged Buddhism. From collections of essays such as *Mindful Politics: A Buddhist Guide to Making the World a Better Place*, featuring contributions from thinkers as diverse as Thích Nhất Hạnh, bell hooks, and Sam

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., Pg 90.

<sup>26</sup> Silicon Valley has taken notice as well. In February 2019, “Calm,” an app focusing on meditation as means to benefit mental health, became the first mindfulness app to achieve a one billion dollar valuation. Sawers, Paul. “The Meditation Unicorn: Calm Raises \$88 million at \$1 Billion Valuation.” *Venture Beat* 6 February 2019. Web. 6 February 2019.



Harris,<sup>27</sup> to essays like Peter Matthiessen's "Watering the Seed of Mindfulness"<sup>28</sup> or gatherings like the conference on "The Politics of Mindfulness" at the 2019 meeting of the Western Political Science Association, the principles of socially-engaged, secularized Buddhism are beginning to be taken seriously, if only by another term. Though the number of practicing Buddhists in America who recognize themselves as such may be holding relatively steady, the actions of a practicing Western Buddhist and his "mindful" Christian neighbor may be more similar than either realize.

### **Politicization and Westernization**

The key facet which differentiates socially-engaged Buddhism from its traditional counterparts is its embrace of political action as a proper function of Buddhist practice. The groundwork for this understanding is laid first by engaged Buddhism's privileging of the realm of activity over that of mere contemplation and further bolstered by the movement of formerly religious symbols and practices into the mundane, secular realm. But though these conditions are necessary for the intellectual justification of engaged Buddhist practice, they are not sufficient to bring about a wholly new politicized version of an ancient tradition. The rise of politicized, engaged Buddhism is as much a result of its context as it is of philosophic development. It is no coincidence that engaged Buddhism has seen its greatest successes in the West and among Western practitioners. It is equally no coincidence that its greatest lights- Thích Nhất Hạnh, the Dalai Lama, and Aung San Suu Kyi- are all closely associated with the West and, in the case of Nhất Hạnh and Aung San Suu Kyi, products of the Western system of academia. The peculiar

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<sup>27</sup> McLeod, Melvin, editor. *Mindful Politics: A Buddhist Guide to Making the World a Better Place*. Wisdom Publications, 2006.

<sup>28</sup> Matthiessen, Peter. "Watering the Seeds of Mindfulness." in Kotler, Arnold, editor. *Engaged Buddhist Reader: Ten Years of Engaged Buddhist Publishing*. Parallax Press, 2000.

political obsession of engaged Buddhism is not a development or evolution from within Buddhist thought itself but a reaction and adaptation to Western pressures, interests, and approaches.

Though engaged Buddhism is undoubtedly an outgrowth of Buddhist thought, at least insofar as it premises itself on Buddhist epistemology, ontology, and soteriology, its use of these elements is unique and likely would never have been realized were Buddhism to have never spread to the West. Kenneth Kraft, describing the difficulties of scholars attempting to parse the peculiar standing of engaged Buddhism, describes the situation as follows, “When they reexamine Buddhism’s 2500-year-old heritage, these authors find that the principles and even some of the techniques of an engaged Buddhism have been latent in the tradition since the time of its founding.” However, he continues, “Qualities that were inhibited in pre-modern Asian setting, they argue, can now be actualized through Buddhism’s exposure to the West, where ethical sensitivity, social activism, and egalitarianism are emphasized.”<sup>29</sup>

Though socially-engaged Buddhism was not explicitly founded on Western principles nor originated by strictly Western thinkers, its existence, its language, and its aims are nonetheless inseparable from the Western context where it has taken its strongest roots and its principles are likely unintelligible outside of the Western political thought from which it has grown. In this regard, socially-engaged Buddhism is itself simply another chapter in the long history of transplanted Buddhist thought. Not unlike the migration of early Buddhism from India into Sri Lanka and Myanmar and later throughout the greater East into Japan, Korea, and China, the transference of Buddhist thought into the West and into America demonstrates its fundamentally malleable nature.

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<sup>29</sup> Eppsteiner, Fred, editor. *The Path of Compassion: Writing on Socially Engaged Buddhism*. Parallax Press, 1988. Pgs xii-xiii.

What remains as of yet unclear is precisely what sort of transference this migration of Buddhism into the West represents. Historically, some migrations of Buddhist thought, such as that into Japan, have led to radical reformulations of Buddhist theory and practice like the rise of Zen. Conversely the migration of Buddhist thought from Sri Lanka into Burma brought relatively minor changes to the underlying core of Buddhist practice in the region. The simple fact is that Buddhist practice in the modern West, which at best has been taking place to any meaningful degree since the middle of the nineteenth century, is still too new to make anything but broad observations of its transference and transformation. Dzogchen Ponlop likens this development to the process of individual enlightenment in broader Buddhist practice, describing Buddhist practice in America as currently maturing from the period of basic training and rigid adherence to particular localized schools of thought into a condition of integration and de-isolation.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, distinct regional variances persist among the estimated 1.4 to 4 million Buddhist practitioners in America.<sup>31</sup> Jeff Wilson, in his analysis of regional Buddhist practice in America, *Dixie Dharma*, describes the tensions inherent between meditation practices on the East Coast versus the West Coast. Mirroring typical observations of broader society, Wilson describes a situation of “stuck-up killjoys” in the East and “self-absorbed hippies” in the West.<sup>32</sup> It is important to note that this is not an observation of differences among various schools in each region, but rather is an internecine division solely amongst practitioners of the same school of Vipassana Insight Meditation, separated by only a few thousand miles and sharing by and large the same cultural upbringing.

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<sup>30</sup> Dzogchen Ponlop. *Rebel Buddha: A Guide to a Revolution of Mind*. Shambhala, 2011. Pg 170.

<sup>31</sup> There are also an estimated 300,000 additional Buddhist practitioners in Canada, though due to immigration patterns it is likely that a higher percentage of Canadian Buddhists are native practitioners rather than converts. McLellan, Janet. “Themes and Issues in the Study of North American Buddhists and Buddhism.” in Numrich, Paul David. *North American Buddhists in Social Context*. Brill, 2008. Pgs 20-21.

<sup>32</sup> Wilson, Jeff Townsend. *Dixie Dharma: Inside a Buddhist Temple in the American South*. University of North Carolina Press, 2012. Pg 225.

This understanding is further complicated by the fact that even within a specifically American context there is no true and proper set of thought or practice which can rightfully be called “American Buddhism.” Buddhist scholars such as Richard Hughes Seager and Peter Gregory note the important distinction within the American context of immigrant Buddhism versus convert Buddhism, which Seager describes as “the most prominent feature of American Buddhism.”<sup>33</sup> Originating from a range of “deep cultural, linguistic, and social differences,” he argues that the primary chasm between immigrant and convert understandings of Buddhism in America lies not simply in traditional forms of worship such as ceremonies or texts, but in the underlying cosmological understandings of each group.<sup>34</sup> Stephen Batchelor examines this same point in relation to the epistemologically contentious subject of reincarnation. While the notion is mostly unremarkable to those who have been raised within the sphere of Eastern cosmology, Batchelor observes that,

For a Western convert to Buddhism, reincarnation is an alien concept, decoupled from any underlying social or cultural function, that you are nonetheless required to adopt as part of your new-found Buddhist identity... It is a foreign religious belief that you struggle to embrace in the context of an unaccommodating culture and in the face of skeptical bemusement from your peers. You are likely to take it far more seriously than your Asian co-religionists but feel much less secure in its validity because, unlike them, you are incapable of taking it for granted.<sup>35</sup>

As Batchelor makes clear, the transference of Buddhism into the Western sphere is not simply a religious matter, nor even is it a philosophic matter. Religious practice extends beyond mere belief and into the realm of culture. “To say that such beliefs [regarding concepts such as

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<sup>33</sup> Seager, Richard Hughes. *Buddhism in America*. Columbia University Press, 1999. Pg 233.; Gregory, Peter N. “Describing the Elephant: Buddhism in America.” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 11: 233-263. 2001.

<sup>34</sup> Seager (1999), 233.

<sup>35</sup> Batchelor (2016), Pg 296.

reincarnation and *karma*] are *embedded* in Buddhist culture,” Batchelor writes, “is not the same as saying that people are convinced that they are true.”<sup>36</sup> Though Batchelor is examining the subject from the perspective of the traditional Eastern cosmology which underlies Buddhist practice, his point speaks to a larger reality regarding Buddhist practice outside of its native context. Because of its nature as amorphous and open to constant questioning, even of its core principles, Buddhist belief and practice in the West is able to a large degree to slough off some of the traditional tenets which are more philosophically offensive to the Western mind, such as a strict belief in rebirth. To this end, it is neither unheard of nor frowned upon for Buddhist practitioners to simultaneously identify as a member of another religion, even those of the Western Judeo-Christian tradition.<sup>37</sup> Creating the necessary philosophic framework for this project of ecumenical, shared identities within the confines of socially-engaged Buddhist thought is the explicit goal of works such as Thích Nhất Hạnh’s *Living Buddha, Living Christ*.<sup>38</sup> In this regard, Buddhist practice in America makes the most of Buddhism’s historical predisposition towards syncretism.<sup>39</sup>

Christopher Queen offers three primary qualities of contemporary Western Buddhist practice. These are (1) a recognition of the inalienable value of the human person, whatever his

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., Pg 294.

<sup>37</sup> Gregory (2001), Pg 237.

<sup>38</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh. *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. Riverhead Books, 2015.

<sup>39</sup> A problem inherent in any transplantation of one set of religious practices into another culture, but one made all the more salient in light of the distinct bifurcation of Buddhist practice in American into practical categories of transplanted immigrant and native convert practice, is that of the dominance of the hegemonic culture at the expense of the traditional order of the transplanted religion. Using Edward Said’s framework of orientalism, Ellen Goldberg examines the transplantation of Buddhism into the North American context. Focusing explicitly on American convert traditions (which she classifies as Non-Asian, North American Buddhism), Goldberg concludes that this draw of Buddhism as a piece of “Eastern Wisdom” was evident in American Buddhist practice from its earliest mentions, such as in the writing of Walt Whitman. (Pg 343) This process of “mystification” intensified with the swell of Zen practice in the 1950s and 1960s, and this tendency by Western practitioners to interpret traditional Buddhist practice primarily in light of their lived experience remains a key facet of Buddhism’s transplantation into the Western sphere. Goldberg, Ellen. “The Re-orientation of Buddhism in North America.” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 11: 340-356. 1999.

or her level of achievement or standing in the community, (2) a recognition of the social and collective nature of experience, shaped in particular by cultural and political institutions that have power to promote good or evil, fulfilment or suffering, progress or decline, and (3) a recognition of the necessity of collective action to address the systemic causes of suffering and promote social advancement in the world.<sup>40</sup> With the exception of an emphasis on the language of suffering, this list reads like that of a political scientist as much as that of a Buddhist scholar. This approach, the couching of Buddhist concepts and arguments in the language of Western political life, is typical of engaged Buddhist writing.

Throughout *Interbeing*, his most fully fleshed statement on the principles of engaged Buddhist practice, Thích Nhất Hạnh drifts in and out of Buddhist and Western parlance. His focus throughout is the cultivation of compassionate action through mindfulness. This is a very Buddhist approach, albeit with a modern bent. But his method in justifying this project is undertaken in decidedly Western terms. Early in his essay, Nhất Hạnh works to explain how we should approach mindful exercise. Here he says that “Mindfulness trainings are practices, not prohibitions. They do not restrict our freedom. They protect us, guarantee our liberty, and prevent us from getting entangled in difficulties and confusion.”<sup>41</sup> This passage is indicative of Nhất Hạnh’s approach throughout. To begin, the language of freedom and liberty are themselves foreign to Buddhist discourse. To the extent that they do exist in some analogue in Buddhist discourse, they lack the political connotations that Nhất Hạnh is all too happy to imply. For example, the closest Buddhist term to freedom would be *moksha*, meaning liberation achieved through enlightenment. This is undoubtedly a type of freedom, but not a political one. Nhất Hạnh makes no effort, here or elsewhere in the essay, to parse out this Buddhist/Western

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<sup>40</sup> Queen (2000), Pg 3.

<sup>41</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh (1998), Pg 7.

distinction, choosing simply to speak in a language comfortable to Western readers without burdening them with the difficulties of Buddhist metaphysics. He does not shy away from admitting the necessity of this part of his project. One of the four founding principles of his Order of Interbeing relays that “A teaching, in order to bring about understanding and compassion, must reflect the needs of people and the realities of society.”<sup>42</sup> Given then that he views modern society as a “destructive momentum of social and economic pressures,” it is fitting that he crafts a Buddhism which can address the ailments of modern, political man.<sup>43</sup>

One of the more flagrant examples of engaged Buddhism’s fast and loose intermingling of Buddhist and Western political language is the found with the notion of justice. Throughout his writings, Nhất Hạnh makes frequent appeals to the idea of justice, be it promoting the ends of social justice or arguing against the injustices created by economic oppression. Though these appeals are not surprising as a function of Western political thought, engaged Buddhism’s preoccupation with justice does decidedly set it apart from traditional Buddhist political thought, which lacks a particular and discernable conception of justice. Instead, within the scope of Buddhist thought, justice (insofar as it can be discovered as such) is found nestled within the larger concept of *dhamma*, or the truth of the nature of reality as expressed in the teachings of the Buddha.<sup>44</sup> Yet for all of its novelty, Nhất Hạnh makes little effort to characterize his exact understanding of justice.

When the topic of justice is discussed in more than a passing fashion, it becomes clear that though Nhất Hạnh is choosing to frame his discussion in terms of the Western ideal of justice, his presentation is grounded more in Buddhist thought than that of the Western tradition.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., Pg 8.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., Pg 33.

<sup>44</sup> For a fuller discussion of the Buddhist conception of justice, please see Chapter Four of this dissertation on “Justice, *Dhamma*, and the Demands of Political Life.”

In an interview with bell hooks on the nature of love and community, hooks introduces a discussion of justice. Addressing the subject, Nhất Hạnh says,

This is a very interesting topic. It was a very important issue for the Buddha. How we view justice depends on our practice of looking deeply. We may think that justice is everyone being equal, having the same rights, sharing the same kind of advantages, but maybe we have not had the chance to look at the nature of justice in terms of no-self. That kind of justice is based on the idea of self, but it may be very interesting to explore justice in terms of no-self.<sup>45</sup>

He offers no more by way of explication, but from his statement here we can draw certain conclusions. Justice, in its traditional Western conception, is insufficient for Nhất Hạnh. Traditional presentations of justice are founded, perhaps necessarily, around the Western conception of the individualized self. It is the project of Buddhism at large to break down this understanding philosophically, and it is the project of engaged Buddhism to then transition this new understanding into the social realm. While he says it would be an interesting idea to explore, he doesn't do so.

He offers some clues as to what this new no-self conception of justice might look like in an essay entitled "True Justice Should Have Compassion in It." The thrust of his essay is exactly what the title would imply, that a proper understanding of justice is one which contains a conception of Buddhist compassion. To help explain what this might mean in practice, Nhất Hạnh addresses the idea of justice as a means to guide punishment. However, what Nhất Hạnh makes clear throughout is that justice can only be rightly understood if we step back and reexamine our notions of victims and perpetrators. He opens his essay,

I believe that true justice should have compassion in it. When someone does something harmful, destructive, the destruction is done not only to the person who is the victim, but it is also done to

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<sup>45</sup> hooks, bell. "Building a Community of Love: bell hooks and Thích Nhất Hạnh." *The Lion's Roar* 24 March 2017. Web. 12 December 2018.



the person who has committed the destruction. We all know that every time we say something unskillful, that can damage our relationship to the other person, making him or her suffer, we know that we have also done harm to ourselves, and created suffering for ourselves. That comes from our lack of skillfulness, our lack of mindfulness, and our lack of compassion, and we suffer as the other person suffers. Maybe not right now, but a little bit later we will suffer. The real cause of the action is our ignorance, our lack of skillfulness.<sup>46</sup>

The presentation of justice here, leveling the actor and acted upon as both equal victims of the creation of suffering, is a good example of an application of Nhất Hạnh's wish to separate justice from the idea of the individuated self. Western conceptions of justice as remunerative punishment premise themselves on the notion that one person suffers and the other person creates suffering. Justice then is found in causing an equal amount of suffering in the offender. What Nhất Hạnh is trying to express is that this understanding of justice is redundant and in itself destructive, insofar as its end is already contained in the act itself, administered in the form of *kamma*. Justice cannot simply be found in repaying a destructive act with another destructive act in the form of punishment, because destructive action already contains punishment within itself. By acting destructively, we not only harm someone else, the action itself harms ourselves as well.

The solution then according to Nhất Hạnh is to approach the idea of justice not from the perspective of leveling the scale, but from the idea of compassion. By viewing injustice through the lens of compassion, we can see that those who cause injustice are equally victims themselves. "So if we know how to look at the so-called criminals, we will have compassion," he writes,

Society has created them like that; they have not been lucky, they have been born into a situation where social conditions, and their parents and other influences, have created that kind of behavior, and that person is very much the victim of the situation. If we see

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<sup>46</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh. "True Justice Should Have Compassion in It." *Films for Action* 4 February 2017. Web. 12 December 2018.

that, we see the nature of interbeing in that kind of act, we will be able to be compassionate, and the punishment that we propose in that case will be lighter, because we want justice. That's not only understanding; that's not only compassion—although there is understanding that has brought compassion—but that's also justice.<sup>47</sup>

What is hidden within Nhất Hạnh's description of justice is that though he is framing his argument in the language of justice, it is not really justice which is the prevailing force here but rather Buddhist compassion. When Nhất Hạnh claims that "With compassion, you can always offer a kind of justice that will contain more patience, understanding and tolerance," it becomes clear that justice is not truly the standard by which we are meant to guide our political action. The proper standard must be a refashioned compassion-cum-justice. Justice, in its Western conception defined by an understanding of self, posits itself as coming into being as the result of an encounter between separate individuated interests. Nhất Hạnh's compassion-cum-justice views justice not as arising from confrontation, but from an acknowledgment that the confrontation itself is illusory.

The most important takeaway from Nhất Hạnh's description of justice is that, though he shrouds his discussion in its language, his fundamental concerns is not really with justice at all, but with compassion. Though he claims that justice contains compassion, his analysis is such that we must ultimately conclude that justice does not simply contain compassion, but likely *is* compassion. Much like the political writings of Aung Sun Suu Kyi, Nhất Hạnh's employment of the language of justice is just as much a rhetorical tool as it is an honest attempt help guide human behavior. In and of itself, this strategy is neither surprising nor damning. Nhất Hạnh is clear on the notion that we must address problems in the language of those we are seeking to

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

help. Though the language of justice is wholly foreign to the tradition of Buddhist political thought, it is the primary vehicle of political expression of those in the West.

But what is important to understand with Nhất Hạnh's use of Western, political language is not that it offends the traditional sensibilities of Buddhist thought. The issue with Nhất Hạnh's politicization is that it is left so thoroughly unexamined and unjustified. Neither Nhất Hạnh, nor the thought of engaged Buddhist at large, offers any apology for Buddhism's inherently apolitical philosophic lexicon, lacking conceptions of ideas like justice and freedom. They simply ignore the fact. However, by then insisting (perhaps justifiably) on the necessity of introducing a political element into modern Buddhist practice, and subsequently choosing to do so by simply inserting pre-existing Western political conceptions into Buddhist discussion, or vice versa, with no real effort to differentiate between the two, engaged Buddhist thought does a disservice to the Western political tradition it is trying to ingratiate itself to.

More dangerously, it runs the risk (intentional or otherwise) of obfuscating the inherently religious nature of the concepts which undergird engaged Buddhist thought. Speaking of justice is a useful tool, but when one uses the language of justice while actually expressing a conception of Buddhist compassion we quickly lose sight of the fact that we are dealing with a religious idea rather than a philosophic or political one. The heart of the liberal tradition is its universality. Freedom and justice are not premised on religious claims but on philosophic claims available to all by use of their reason. The compassionate justice of engaged Buddhist thought or the idea of justice as *dhamma* of the larger Buddhist tradition are both inherently exclusionary in their presentations insofar as they are only compelling to a Buddhist practitioner. Though this does not mean that they are then incapable of serving as the foundation for a political order, it does mean that any political order which takes them as its grounding will necessarily be incapable of also

maintaining a liberal and pluralistic stance. We needn't be concerned that engaged Buddhism is attempting to introduce an element of politics into Buddhist practice. But we should be concerned when this project is abstracted from its reality as grounded in religious claims and presented as a viable alternative for the foundation of a liberal political order.

This danger is made all the more pressing by the practical realities of the engaged Buddhist political project. Though the roots of engaged Buddhist thought are in the East, the core of the phenomenon is primarily a native Western construction. It was shaped most clearly by Western practitioners, the majority of its writing takes place in English, and its philosophic premises downplay the metaphysical elements which would be considered more outlandish to Western thinkers, such as rebirth and the release from its cycle. This indebtedness to Western thought can clearly be seen in the politics and policy aims which it sets forth as its practical end. While its language may be that of compassion and interdependence, the political program of engaged Buddhism aligns almost exactly with that of the contemporary progressive American Left.<sup>48</sup> It is not the particular content of this alignment, left or right, which is concerning. Rather it is that the near perfect alignment of the two supposedly distinct projects makes it all too easy to lose sight of the fact that one is built on liberal preconceptions and the other built on religious claims.

Without the benefit of close examination, it is difficult to meaningfully distinguish between the political aims of engaged Buddhism and that of progressive liberalism generally. Throughout various collections of essays, the contours of a progressive political project are

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<sup>48</sup> Moore, Matthew J. "Buddhism, Mindfulness, and Transformative Politics." *New Political Science* 38: 272-282. 2016. Pgs 275-276.

formed. Concerns surrounding issues of racial justice<sup>49</sup>, environmental action<sup>50</sup>, feminism<sup>51</sup>, and economic globalization<sup>52</sup> form the backbone of the engaged Buddhist political ethic. This political project is also backed by a burgeoning analysis in the field of economics. Economists like Clair Brown<sup>53</sup> and Laszlo Zsolnai<sup>54</sup> find themselves in league with religious figures like Sulak Sivaraksa<sup>55</sup> in examining and critiquing the core competitive principles of capitalism in favor of a new Buddhist economic approach which favors the engaged Buddhist stance of human interdependence.

Given the preeminence which engaged Buddhism places on compassion, it is not surprising to see it favor a political and economic approach which directly confronts the transgressions of oppression. But when Clair Brown writes that “you don’t need to be a Buddhist to embrace a Buddhist approach to economics. You need only to share the Dalai Lama’s belief that human nature is gentle and compassionate and embrace the idea that economics can be a force for good,” she belies the universality that her use of concepts like Pareto optimality and

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<sup>49</sup> See: Vesely-Flad, Rima. “Black Buddhists and the Body: New Approaches to Socially Engaged Buddhism.” *Religions* 8: 1-9. 2017.; Ferguson, Gaylon. “No, Color, All Colors.” in McLeod, Melvin, editor. *Mindful Politics: A Buddhist Guide to Making the World a Better Place*. Wisdom Publications, 2006.

<sup>50</sup> See: Thích Nhất Hạnh. “The Individual, Society, and Nature.” and Robert Aitken. “Gandhi, Dogen and Deep Ecology.” in Eppsteiner, Fred, editor. *The Path of Compassion: Writing on Socially Engaged Buddhism*. Parallax Press, 1988.; “Interdependence and Detachment: Toward a Buddhist Environmental Ethic.” in Gross, Rita M. *Soaring and Settling: Buddhist Perspectives on Contemporary Social and Religious Issues*. Continuum Publishing Company, 2000.; Kaza, Stephanie. “To Save All Beings: Buddhist Environmental Activism.” in Queen, Christopher S., editor. *Engaged Buddhism in the West*. Wisdom Publications, 2000.

<sup>51</sup> See: Gross, Rita M. *Soaring and Settling: Buddhist Perspectives on Contemporary Social and Religious Issues*. Continuum Publishing Company, 2000.; Gross, Rita. “The Wisdom in Anger.” in McLeod, Melvin, editor. *Mindful Politics: A Buddhist Guide to Making the World a Better Place*. Wisdom Publications, 2006.; Ragir, Judith. “Rape.” in Eppsteiner, Fred, editor. *The Path of Compassion: Writing on Socially Engaged Buddhism*. Parallax Press, 1988.; Moon, Susan, “Activist Women in American Buddhism.” in Queen, Christopher S., editor. *Engaged Buddhism in the West*. Wisdom Publications, 2000.

<sup>52</sup> See: Sivaraksa, Sulak. *Conflict, Culture, Change: Engaged Buddhism in a Globalizing World*. Wisdom Publications, 2015.; Sivaraksa, Sulak. “A Buddhist Response to Globalization.” in McLeod, Melvin, editor. *Mindful Politics: A Buddhist Guide to Making the World a Better Place*. Wisdom Publications, 2006.; “Buddhist Values for Overcoming Pro-natalism and Consumerism.” in Gross, Rita M. *Soaring and Settling: Buddhist Perspectives on Contemporary Social and Religious Issues*. Continuum Publishing Company, 2000.

<sup>53</sup> Brown, Clair. *Buddhist Economics: An Enlightened Approach to the Dismal Science*. Bloomsbury Press, 2017.

<sup>54</sup> Zsolnai, Laszlo. “Western Economics Versus Buddhist Economics.” *Society and Economy* 29: 145-153. 2007.

<sup>55</sup> Sivaraksa, Sulak. *The Wisdom of Sustainability: Buddhist Economics for the 21st Century*. Koa Books, 2009.

behavioral economics seem to imply.<sup>56</sup> The notion that engaged Buddhism, be it in the form of politics or economics, can freely be detached from Buddhist practice and principles is a dangerous falsehood which is left all but unacknowledged and unexamined by practitioners of engaged Buddhist thought.

### **Engaged Buddhism as the Grounding for a Liberal Political Order**

Engaged Buddhism attempts to balance a fine line, dancing seamlessly between Buddhist concepts and Western philosophic concepts, religious claims and rational claims, spiritual ends and politics ends. To a great degree, this lithe flexibility has contributed to the excitement on the part of adherents of engaged Buddhism as it relates to its potential and possibilities. With this approach, engaged Buddhism is able to maintain the allure of its ancient wisdom while avoiding the concurrent religious baggage that plagues the teachings of the religions native to the Western tradition. It is a matter of having your cake and eating it too; even though many in the contemporary West (and particularly so among the liberal set most inclined to embrace engaged Buddhism) are turned off by the notion of religion and religious practice, engaged Buddhism is explained away as secular or at least founded on testable and falsifiable claims.

This approach is embraced by even one of the most outspoken critics of religion in the West, neuroscientist Sam Harris. In his essay on creating a secularized approach to Buddhist practice, Harris claims that “For the fact is that a person can embrace the Buddha’s teaching, and even become a Buddhist contemplative (and, one must presume, a Buddha) without believing anything on insufficient evidence. The same cannot be said of the teachings for faith-based religions.”<sup>57</sup> This approach, centered on the idea that Buddhist teachings are not proffered on

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<sup>56</sup> Brown (2017), Pg xiv.

<sup>57</sup> Harris, Sam. “Killing the Buddha.” in McLeod, Melvin, editor. *Mindful Politics: A Buddhist Guide to Making the World a Better Place*. Wisdom Publications, 2006. Pg 294.

grounds of faith but on testable, quasi-scientific claims, is typical of those who wish to reorient Buddhist thought into a secular practice. Despite his frequent and outspoken attacks on the mixture of politics and religion, Harris believes that Buddhism offers a unique opportunity to sidestep these issues. The teachings of Buddhism themselves are valuable but “the religion of Buddhism currently stands in their way.”<sup>58</sup> His solution then is to work to divorce Buddhist truths from Buddhist practice, something that he sees as rooted in historical precedent, offering that we don’t refer to “Christian physics” or “Muslim algebra” even though each practice originated from within these religious traditions.<sup>59</sup>

What Harris misses here, and what the discourse on engaged Buddhism obscures generally, is the fact that politics and religion are not related to each other as religion and algebra might be. It greatly undersells the nature of reality to claim that religious practice and political philosophy, both enterprises centered on guiding proper human action, can be as easily separated from one another as human ethics and mathematics. Harris ignores that there has never been a war fought over math or physics, and that any violent conflict which may have arisen in relation to these fields is itself a result of their conflict with standing religious beliefs. Harris, along with Stephen Batchelor and the other proponents of the secular Buddhism movement, premise their project on the assumption that Buddhist teachings, or at least those parts of Buddhist teachings which they consider important enough to maintain, are capable of supporting themselves when divorced from the larger Buddhist context (be it historical, metaphysical, cultural, or cosmological) in which they arose.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., Pg 299.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., Pg 298.

<sup>60</sup> This is not unlike the Nietzschean-influenced argument, frequently echoed by opponents of Harris’ larger project of a scientifically derived system of rational human ethics dubbed the Moral Landscape, that though he might acknowledge that God is dead he continues to shroud himself in the vestiges of a Christian morality regardless. This raises the question of whether a secular Buddhism differs in any fundamental way from that of a Western atheism which nonetheless upholds an ethics grounded in Christian morality. Further, which is left more impure by the

The only notable meaningful critique of engaged Buddhism as a vehicle for political practice is offered by Matthew J. Moore in his essay “Buddhism, Mindfulness, and Transformative Politics.” Though himself a general supporter of the engaged Buddhism movement, Moore is careful to note the limitations for using engaged Buddhism to craft a practical political order. He outlines three key issues which limit the role of engaged Buddhism as a tool in modern political life. The first of these he describes as philosophical, and relates to the metaphysical premises (such as *kamma* and rebirth) that engaged Buddhism has sought to underplay or ignore. Moore correctly points out these stances are not merely incidental spiritual baggage to traditional Buddhist belief, they are in reality taken as “a fact of human existence.”<sup>61</sup> Importantly, these beliefs also have real-world implications for a Buddhist political life. *Kamma*, for example, brings with it “the troubling implication that people who are born into lowly social positions, or who suffer greatly in life, are to some degree merely reaping the *kammatic* consequences of their own prior misdeeds.”<sup>62</sup>

Next, Moore turns to the historical texts of the Buddhist tradition and the ways which they contradict the basic premises of engaged Buddhist thought. Citing the Pāli Canon, Moore addresses the fundamentally apolitical/anti-political stance of the early Buddhist texts. Throughout, participation in political life is seen as both burdensome and dangerous, something reserved only for those capable of handling its deleterious effects. This notion itself almost completely undercuts the prospects of democratic action. Even the Buddha, paralleling Socrates’ philosopher-king, chose himself to abstain from the duties of the wheel-turning monarch,

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exchange, a religion which has been secularized or a supposedly secular practice which is nonetheless guided by a religious ethos?

<sup>61</sup> Moore, Matthew J. “Buddhism, Mindfulness, and Transformative Politics.” *New Political Science* 38: 272-282. 2016. Pg 276.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.



believing himself to be better used as a spiritual force. Prior to its intermingling with Western thought, the overwhelming stance of Buddhist political thought was that political life is a distraction and that proper human action directs us away from political action whenever possible.<sup>63</sup> Though engaged Buddhism is able to find a few historical precedents for its approach in the ruling actions of Asoka or the third century CE thought of Nagarjuna and his founding of Mahāyāna practice, there were almost two thousand years of Buddhist practice following the introduction of these actors into the Buddhist tradition and it was still not until the introduction of Western political philosophy that anyone took these lessons as representing a new politically orientated approach to Buddhist practice. While Stephen Batchelor might wish to maintain that these developments simply represent a new transformation of Buddhist practice in keeping with historical evolutions like Tibetan or Zen Buddhism, one is left to wonder exactly how many core principles can be abandoned before we must conclude that this new secularized, politicized and Westernized Buddhism is something new altogether rather than a simple reformulation. Buddhism, by the nature of its philosophic stances towards truth, is capable of withstanding a great deal innovation, but is it exempt from the problem of Theseus' ship?

Finally, with his main critique Moore considers the possibility of a Buddhist revolution in American politics as a practical matter. Given the nature of Western democracy, the prospect of a rise in Buddhist politics seems a moot point, at least for the time being. Citing Pew research from 2010, Moore asserts that only 1.2% of the American population identifies as Buddhist, with the numbers in Europe being an even lower .2%.<sup>64</sup> This certainly is not the numeric foundation for a successful Buddhist political revolution. However, though their numbers are small, proponents of engaged Buddhism have been successful in furthering their message, with a

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., Pg 277.

staggering increase in books published on the subject of mindfulness in recent years, from only 187 published from 1980 to 1989 to nearly 5000 published between 2010 and 2016.<sup>65</sup>

What is striking about Moore's final conclusion on the possibility of a mindful political revolution is its focus on pragmatic concerns. He views the rise of an engaged Buddhist politics as unlikely strictly on the basis of demography and views it as problematic only insofar as it lacks a proper grounding in the traditional Buddhist stances on the nature of politics. What Moore does not address, and what is ignored throughout the discourse on engaged Buddhism, is how the principles of engaged Buddhism square with the necessities of the liberal democratic political orders in which it is trying to insinuate itself. It is simply taken as an unquestioned assumption that if the ends of engaged Buddhist thought are sufficiently good that they must be justifiable in practice on liberal grounds.

Proponents of engaged Buddhism as the foundation for a political order miss the fundamental lesson of the ethnic cleansing in contemporary Myanmar. Lost in their game of secularization and politicization is the reality that when in the hands of actual Buddhist practitioners Buddhist principles are not simply a philosophy or a set of ethical guidelines on par with any other system of thought in the liberal West; they are religious claims. As is shown in stark detail in Myanmar by the actions of Aung San Suu Kyi, the fervent tribalism inspired by religious claims cannot simply be whitewashed away by the use of liberal Western language. We cannot ignore the foundation of engaged Buddhism as a system of religious practice simply because its ends mirror that of liberal politics. A politics founded on a series of religious claims, no matter how liberal they may appear, is fundamentally contradictory to the foundations and political commitments of a pluralistic liberal order due to the nature of their exclusionary origins.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

Engaged Buddhism wishes to view itself as exempt from this formulation, believing that an agreement on ends is sufficient to justify a break on the matter of core principles.

The rise of engaged Buddhism as a meaningful political project in the West presents an interesting series of philosophic challenges to the liberal political order. As the tenets of engaged Buddhist thought (and Buddhist political thought generally) make clear, Buddhist political actors, even in the West, must understand themselves and their political project as Buddhist first, relegating any other philosophic commitments to a secondary position. This necessarily creates a tension between Buddhist political action and the liberal political condition of the West. As a practical matter, this tension is more philosophically troubling than it is actually dangerous as a political concern. As participants in a pre-existing liberal democratic order, the prospect of engaged Buddhist practitioners as political actors, perhaps even as something approaching their own distinct political party, is not a particularly harrowing outlook. Their general political outlook as a matter of practical policy is in line with much of mainstream Western politics, and there is little to indicate that they would be anything but good political stewards. But we cannot solely consider engaged Buddhists as components of a pre-existing political system. That their numbers are such that they represent a minute political faction at the moment is incidental to their larger concerns. The political project of engaged Buddhism cannot simply be viewed in light of its role within a pre-existing regime, but must further be considered in light of being taken to its logical conclusion, as the foundation for a political order in its own right.

The Dalai Lama, arguably the world's most famous Buddhist, is himself an adherent to the principles of engaged Buddhism. His understanding, both of political life and the larger

Buddhist soteriological project, is founded on the necessity of compassion.<sup>66</sup> In an essay entitled “A New Approach to Global Problems,” itself from a compendium of engaged Buddhist thought, the Dalai Lama says of compassion as a political principle that,

Despite the progressive secularization brought about by worldwide modernization and despite systematic attempts in some parts of the world to destroy spiritual values, the vast majority of humanity continues to believe in one religion or another. The underlying faith in religion, evident even under irreligious political systems, clearly demonstrates the potency of religion as such. This spiritual energy and power can purposefully be used to bring about the spiritual conditions necessary for world peace.<sup>67</sup>

What is all too frequently lost to Western observers, perhaps because of his soft-spoken demeanor and equally delicate language, is that unlike Thích Nhất Hạnh, the Dalai Lama is not simply a theoretician of Buddhist political thought. He is himself a true political actor. In his role as the head of the Tibetan government-in-exile, the Dalai Lama is not a member, a mere one among many, of some democratic regime. He is instead perhaps the closest living embodiment of the traditional Buddhist *cakkavatti*, a leader whose success or failure is judged in light of his ability to forward the *dhamma*. For all his language, and admitted gestures towards liberalization, the Dalai Lama is in practice the head of a theocratic regime. Viewed in this light it is all the more troubling to see him write in the same essay that,

I question the popular assumption that religion and ethics have no place in politics and that religious persons should seclude themselves as hermits. Such a view of religion is one-sided; it lacks a proper perspective on individual's relation to society and the role of religion in our lives. Ethics is as crucial to a politician as it is to a religious practitioner.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> See: Dalai Lama. *Ethics for the New Millennium*. Riverhead, 1999.; *An Open Heart: Practicing Compassion in Everyday Life*. Little, Brown and Company, 2001.; *How to Expand Love: Widening the Circle of Loving Relationships*. Atria Books, 2005.

<sup>67</sup> Dalai Lama. “A New Approach to Global Problems.” in McLeod, Melvin, editor. *Mindful Politics: A Buddhist Guide to Making the World a Better Place*. Wisdom Publications, 2006. Pg 23.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, Pg 25.

This statement, in itself, is not a call to theocracy<sup>69</sup>. But it must be viewed within the Dalai Lama's larger understanding of political life. In the same essay, the Dalai Lama addresses the idea of political foundations, the ideas which should undergird a proper political order. On this subject he writes,

Within each nation, the individual ought to be given the right to happiness, and among nations, there must be equal concern for the welfare of even the smallest nations. I am not suggesting that one system is better than another and all should adopt it. On the contrary, a variety of political systems and ideologies is desirable and accords with the variety of dispositions within the human community. Thus each community should be free to evolve its own political and socioeconomic system, based on the principle of self-determination.<sup>70</sup>

At first blush, this reads like any other Buddhist statement on political fluidity and pragmatism. But it is important to note here both the context and the subject. The notion of self-determination as standard for human activity is a key component of liberal political theory. However, this is not the matter which the Dalai Lama is describing. He is not calling for self-determination of individual action within the context of an over-arching liberal order, but for the freedom of individual states to create their own self-determined political orders as a matter of first principles.

The Dalai Lama, a political leader and head of state, is not calling for freedom of personal action but for the freedom of statesman (himself included) in the construction of political regimes. While it is not shocking to claim that a political order should be constructed in line with the makeup and character of those who will constitute the nation over which it rules, the hidden danger of the Dalai Lama's sentiment here is the extremity to which it takes Buddhist politics' pragmatic stance. As the Dalai Lama makes clear, as a matter of first political principles

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<sup>69</sup> Though it equally does little to rule one out.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., Pgs 24-25.

Buddhism makes no demands about the nature of a regime. Any regime is justified, so long as that regime “accords with the variety of dispositions within the human community.” Given this stance, what true critique of the regime in Myanmar could the Dalai Lama make? While he has publically questioned the *actions* of the regime in light of the Rohingya crisis, his critique is unable to address the underlying cause of those actions, the use of religious principles as the fundamental guide to political action, as opposed to the restraints placed on a state in a liberal constitutional order.<sup>71</sup> In practice, it is unlikely that the Dalai Lama would even be inclined to make such a critique, as the foundations of his Tibetan regime rest upon the same philosophic and political structures as that of Myanmar.

Engaged Buddhism wishes to posit itself as fundamentally different than the Buddhist political thought which underlies traditional Buddhist regimes. Through the processes of secularization, the use of Western political language, and the maintenance of political stances in line with mainstream Western beliefs, it would seem that the majority of engaged Buddhist practitioners in the West understand themselves as regular political actors in a Western liberal democracy who just happen to be Buddhist. In this regard, their policy preferences and political choices are defined by their Buddhism much in the same way that these decisions are made by a Christian or a Jew in the same political context. It is presented, as with the Dalai Lama’s subtle attempt to wholly conflate religion and ethics into one entity, as simply an application of Buddhist principles through the democratic political process.

But as the Dalai Lama’s statement on political foundations makes clear, this alignment of engaged Buddhist principles and mainstream Western politics is ultimately superficial, the result of an attempt by Buddhist political thinkers to create a safe space for their politics to thrive

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<sup>71</sup> Westcott, Ben and Steve George. “Buddha Would Have Helped Persecuted Rohingya Refugees, Dalai Lama Says.” *CNN* 13 September 2017. Web. 15 March 2019.

within the context of a Western liberal democracy. When the policy preferences of an engaged Buddhist practitioner are juxtaposed to that of a mainstream Progressive political project, it isn't quite clear precisely what value is added by the addition of engaged Buddhist belief as opposed to that of any other adherent to Progressive values. To say that engaged Buddhism has merely coopted a progressive political project for its own ends would be both uncharitable and greatly undersell the deep-seated religious commitments of engaged Buddhist practitioners. But we equally cannot dismiss the fact that the engaged Buddhist project cannot reconcile its core belief (a remnant of the greater Buddhist political project), that it must be Buddhist beliefs and principles which serve to directly guide political action, with the necessities of a liberal political order. As regular political actors, simply voting on policy as equal democratic citizens, the political project of engaged Buddhism is benign, and depending on one's political outlook, beneficial to the betterment of society. But when taken to its logical conclusions, either in the personage of a ruler such as the Dalai Lama or as a majoritarian faction in a democratic regime, engaged Buddhist thought betrays these seemingly liberal political commitments. A political regime defined by engaged Buddhist principles cannot be liberal, at least as a matter of first principles. It must be Buddhist first, and anything else second. A Buddhist political regime, engaged or otherwise, cannot abide by Hobbes's effort to bring the sacred under the purview of the sovereignty of the state. Nor can it ultimately abide by the Lockean principles of religious toleration, as the silence of the Burmese Buddhist regime has made abundantly clear.

The issue of Buddhism's pragmatic political stance, and the extremity which its logic allows, is of particular concern in an age of decreasing respect for political institutions and a general disregard for the constraints placed on political actors by constitutional limitations. While there is undoubtedly value in the Buddhist critique of rigid ideology (as will be discussed

in Chapter Seven), the danger is that these critiques will serve to further erode even the most basic notions of political restraint which underlie the Western conception of constitutional government. Here we again see a general alignment between Buddhist political thought and modern Progressivism. For both, the notion of politics as primarily a vehicle to serve human progress underlies their approach to political action. The two projects differ not in method, but in ends. While Progressive thought seeks human flourishing in a political condition, Buddhist political thought seeks human flourishing in a spiritual condition. But as the political texts of the Pāli Canon make clear, a baseline condition of social order and peace must be maintained (by government if necessary) for this spiritual project to take hold. It is perhaps not surprising then that the two systems find themselves as natural allies. Strictly as a matter of politics, the ends of a progressive political project are seemingly identical to that of Buddhist political thought. The Buddhist political project only seeks to push beyond these mundane concerns, believing them to be a necessary predicate to its larger soteriological project. In either case, given Buddhist political thought's understanding of politics as wholly instrumental, it is difficult to justify a respect of constitutional restraint on Buddhist grounds. Might a constitution simply be another attachment from which we must release ourselves in the project of enlightenment?

### **Conclusion**

Engaged Buddhists speak in the language of freedom and of rights. But rights in this context are only justified as a function of the religious principle of compassion, and freedom (at least as a political virtue) is given no real philosophic basis at all. Engaged Buddhism is liberal as a matter of practical ends, but arrives at these conclusions solely as a function of inherently illiberal religious claims. The project of engaged Buddhism has sought, likely without ill intention, to ignore or obscure the foundations of engaged Buddhism as a religious practice as a



means of bolstering its standing as a political project. Within the confines of a traditionally Buddhist context, such as its promotion by Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar, this strategy makes some sense. But even here the situation is complicated by Myanmar's attempt to augment its traditional politics to align more closely with liberal principles in order to move into the globalized modern political world.

Engaged Buddhism offers a political program with no real underlying political theory. There is no underlying political conception of citizenship, or of justice, or of rights. These notions (insofar as they are addressed at all) are, without explicit awareness, assumed and borrowed wholesale from the Western liberal tradition which engaged Buddhism has worked to graft itself upon. While this is not a damning approach in and of itself, it becomes so when engaged Buddhism subsequently seeks to hand-wave away its origins as a religious design and claim instead that it is first and foremost a secular, political program. By coopting the philosophic political conceptions of the modern West, without any real attempt at redefinition or differentiation, engaged Buddhism obscures its origins. It posits itself as the grounding for a liberal political order, but fails to live up to the requirements of pluralistic liberal politics. Engaged Buddhism may be valuable as a guide to human action, a social project designed to foster Buddhist ethics, but it falters by overstepping its role and assuming that it can be further extrapolated into a new foundation for a liberal political order. Though it posits that it is a new ground upon which to build, it offers no novel political theory and by failing to go beyond merely coopting the language of liberalism as a means to reassure its Western supporters it also cannot rightly maintain to have divorced itself from its lineage as rooted in religious practice and truth claims. It forces us to confront a deceptively difficult question: is superficial agreement on political ends a sufficient foundation on which to build a workable politics, or must there also be

agreement at the level of first political principles? As of yet, proponents of engaged Buddhism have failed to acknowledge that this tension even exists.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION-BUDDHIST LESSONS FOR THE WESTERN POLITICAL WORLD**

Engaged Buddhism and the political crisis in Myanmar are ultimately rooted in the same philosophic conflict. Both are attempts to reconcile Buddhist political thought with the liberalism of the modern West. But in both instances, the projects are hampered by Buddhist political thought's ultimate inability to detach itself from its religious origins. Buddhist political thought is not intelligible outside of the context of the greater Buddhist project. Though its politics mirror the political program of liberalism in a number of ways, it arrives at these conclusions not on the basis of reason but in the name of the claims of the Buddhist soteriological project. Thus, the claims of Buddhist political thought are only intelligible as a function of Buddhist thought and are only compelling to those who accept the premises of Buddhist thought.

Whereas the liberal project of the modern West founds itself on rational claims of human psychology and the status of the individual, available to and compelling to anyone as a function of reason and their rational faculties, Buddhism cannot offer this universality. By founding its political thought on religious premises, Buddhist political theory is fundamentally exclusionary and non-pluralistic. This is not simply an academic observation. In Myanmar, this reality has led to a genocide taken in the name preserving religious tradition and culture. Engaged Buddhism, an interpretation of Buddhist political thought all too sensitive to this sort of oppression, seeks to exempt itself from these pressures by approaching Buddhism as a secular phenomenon. However, still tethered to its Buddhist foundations in order to justify the ends of its project, it offers no actual secularized epistemology, metaphysics, or political grounding of its own. It simply exists as a hodge-podge pastiche of Western and Buddhist concepts with no real means to differentiate its claims.

But this not to say that there is no value to be found in Buddhist political thought. Though its foundations in religious claims may limit its reach, the political theory of the Buddhist tradition nonetheless offers a few positive prescriptive elements which are useful as a lens to view the deficiencies of the Western political project. Buddhist political thought is seen as secondary even within its own tradition. Though this may be viewed as an indictment or weakness from the perspective of Western political theory, it is this novel deflationary stance on the importance of political life which is likely Buddhist political thought's most valuable avenue for contribution.

### **The Buddhist Critique of Western Political Thought**

In many ways it seems as though Buddhist political thought is perpetually required to offer a defense of itself against its Western counterpart. The politics of the West are the hegemon encroaching onto the traditional political practices of the Buddhist world. Though much of this is simply a function of geo-political realities, it is also a reasonable outcome as it relates to the nature of each system of political thought. Buddhist thought views politics and political life as secondary, as compared to the Western obsession with the inescapability of politics. It is thus not surprising that the approach which barely feels the need to justify its own project is in danger of being swallowed up by that which views itself as primary to the human condition. But, though it may view itself as secondary, this does not mean that Buddhist political thought has nothing to offer Western political theory. The dangers of the Western obsession with the primacy of politics were laid bare in the twentieth century, with the rise of totalitarian political system which understood their self-created political religions as the apex of human existence. That the maintenance of these systems was built on untold scores of human suffering is a lesson that should be indelibly etched into the Western mind but which seems to be all too quickly

becoming forgotten. Buddhist political thought, in its presentation of politics as a secondary human concern, offers a means to view the problem of the Western obsession with the politics from a fresh stance.

Buddhism has much to say to Western political thought, but not much of it is kind. Regarding both ancient and modern Western political thought, Buddhism thoroughly rejects the philosophic foundations of each respective epoch. In the case of the ancients, Buddhism counsels the philosopher to set aside all duty to anything but truth. This requires the philosopher to completely abandon the city, perhaps to go live as a hermit like Nietzsche's Zarathustra. Both Plato and Aristotle would thoroughly reject this notion, albeit for slightly different reasons. Each, however, would maintain that removing the philosopher from the city (or in the case of Aristotle at the very least removing him from a condition of friendship, itself an attachment from the Buddhist perspective) renders a damning blow to the practice of philosophy. Both the Buddhist and the Greeks value truth above all else, but only the Buddha contends that the seeker of wisdom can completely detach from the world in his quest in obtaining it. Ancient political thought views political life as fundamental, while Buddhist political thought views it as purely instrumental. Escape from politics is considered both possible and likely practicable to the Buddhist. For Plato, escape from political life was only seemingly possible through death, and given the circumstances he presents in the *Phaedo* it would seem maybe not even then. Buddhist political thought rejects this notion out of hand as evidence of an attachment which will ensure the maintenance of suffering. The Greeks make a distinction between passion well-used and passion ill-used. The philosopher himself is a man of passion, though his eroticism is pointed towards the heavens rather than towards the earth. For the Buddhist, this distinction is not only lacking in meaning, but ultimately harmful. Any attachment, even to truth, is an attachment all

the same, and all attachment leads to suffering. Philosophy brings wisdom to the Greeks, yet impedes it to the Buddhist. Socrates and the Buddha can only agree in regards to death, and even then Socrates maintains his ironic distance.

The Buddhist critique of modern political thought requires less nuance. The modern reorientation towards materialism forces Buddhism to reject the premises of modern Western political thought out of hand. The clearest instance of this separation can be seen in Hobbes's founding of political life on the fear of violent death. By beginning from the premise that existence itself is nothing more than material, "a motion of limbs," Hobbes raises death to the position of chief evil. To the Buddhist, this is evidence not only of an undue attachment to the physical but equally an unwarranted exaltation of the physical to a place of primacy over the metaphysical. Whereas Hobbes views the here and now as the only condition worthy of man's attention, Buddhist thought relegates it almost completely in favor of a belief that mundane politics are only valuable insofar as they point beyond themselves.

Where modernity and Buddhist political thought do agree, however, is in the position of reason as primarily instrumental rather than as a good in and of itself. Because Hobbes lowers the value of truth in his system from the highest good, as it was to the Greeks, to merely a summation of observed sense perceptions, he also lowers reason from its standing as man's sole means to achieve truth, and thus from its position as the only avenue for man to reach his highest end to merely a mundane instrument of pragmatic calculation. This pragmatism is in line with the Buddhist understanding of viewing not only reason but political life generally as mere tools towards the furthering of the ultimate end, achieving enlightenment. While the Greeks exalted reason, Hobbes and the Buddha view it as valuable only insofar as it actually furthers a practical end.

Buddhism rejects the premises of both ancient and modern Western political thought, one for insisting on being too noble and the other for insisting on being too base. Traditional Buddhist political thought calls for a detachment from the political which is unacceptable to the ancients, but insists on a maintenance of the metaphysical which violates the sensibilities of modernity. Buddhist political thought, whether it be in the way it approaches the role of wisdom in political life or in its view of the role of the state as a moral tool, does not present any ideas which are fundamentally novel to the Western political canon. The novelty and value of Buddhist political thought is not in any conceptual originality but in the way it orders and values these concepts as a guide to political life.

#### **A Western Analogue— Buddhist Political Thought and Ecclesiastes**

This call for a detachment from political life is not, however, completely foreign to the Western tradition. While the political thought of Western philosophy (both ancient and modern) cannot seem to remove itself from the notion that political life must be at the fore of any meaningful account of reality, there is some Western precedent for the deprioritization of politics. The Book of Ecclesiastes presents a view of the world where politics exists, and is perhaps necessary, but where it is as far removed from man's rightful purview as is possible.

The Book of Ecclesiastes is odd within the Judeo-Christian canon not simply because of its bleak and pessimistic outlook, but also in the way that it is concerned not primarily with God but with human wisdom. One cannot help but consider the possibility that these two facts are interrelated; the deeper we move towards the worldly (or as it could be phrased, the further we move from God), the less hopeful we become. Ecclesiastes, however, does not present itself this way. Attaining wisdom, even merely human wisdom, is a task given to man from God. Yet that does not mean that it is sufficient, nor even positive for mankind. In a parallel to the Socratic

dictum, Ecclesiastes proclaims “I know that all I know is for nothing.” And much like Socrates in the *Phaedo*, it is the ever-present specter of death which informs Ecclesiastes’ philosophy.

Death is an equalizer, embracing the wise man and the fool alike in equal measure.

The Book of Ecclesiastes, while eventually arriving at a prescriptive standard, does so only by way of an analysis of the nature of reality and man’s standing within it. In this way, the text is inherently philosophic. The subject of the work bounces around from biography to social observation, but the connective tissue of the discussion is the idea of wisdom (or the lack thereof) and the role that it plays in man’s life and death. The author of Ecclesiastes presents himself as a philosopher as much a theologian. Yet though he may resemble the Greek thinkers as a matter of occupation, he clearly does not endorse the enterprise with the vigor of Socrates. This is the contradiction which drives the thought of Ecclesiastes. Seeking wisdom is “an evil business,”<sup>1</sup> but it is that very task which the author undertakes.<sup>2</sup> He goes on, “For in much wisdom is much worry, and he who adds wisdom adds pain.”<sup>3</sup> These seemingly anti-philosophic words in the opening chapter lay the groundwork for Ecclesiastes’ philosophic stance.

Insofar as his outlook is characterized by an obsession with wisdom, Qohelet<sup>4</sup> mirrors the thought of the Greeks. He does not however share their optimistic understanding of the value of wisdom. The act of seeking wisdom he describes as “herding the wind”<sup>5</sup> and the result of the search painful.<sup>6</sup> Though theoretically possible from a temporal standpoint, it is unlikely that

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<sup>1</sup> *Ecclesiastes*, Chapter 1, Verse 13.

<sup>2</sup> All translations come from Robert Alter. *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes: A Translation with Commentary*. W.W. Norton, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> *Ecclesiastes*, Chapter 1, Verse 18.

<sup>4</sup> While there is not a set standard, most modern scholarship on the work maintains the Hebrew title of the author while presenting the anglicized title of the work itself, lessening confusion between the two referents. This convention will be maintained here as well.

<sup>5</sup> This description likely alludes to his understanding of the nature of existence itself as “Merest breath...all is mere breath” (translated in the King James Version as “Vanity of vanities... all is vanity.”)

<sup>6</sup> *Ecclesiastes*, Chapter 1, Verse 17.



Qohelet's writing holds any direct inspiration from Greek thought.<sup>7</sup> We find no influence in his language and word choice from the Greeks.<sup>8</sup> Qohelet is likely an original thinker in the truest sense of the term. But this is not to say that his thought strikes us as unfamiliar. In writing about Ecclesiastes, both Augustine and Hobbes draw us towards Plato, and with good reason.

While Augustine attempts to use Ecclesiastes' words as a (somewhat unconvincing) justification for the Eucharist<sup>9</sup>, his most substantial discussion of Ecclesiastes relates to wisdom.<sup>10</sup> Augustine, who regards the author of Ecclesiastes as Solomon, describes Solomon's attempt in the Book of Ecclesiastes to demonstrate the futility of worldly wisdom unconstrained by divine inspiration. Wisdom, in and of itself, is a good, but it is a wildly insufficient good. The wise man and the foolish man, the good man and the evil man, all are subject to justice and injustice in seemingly randomly quantities, and more importantly all are subject equally to the fleeting nature of human existence.<sup>11</sup>

Hobbes draws this point into even clearer distinction. Whereas Augustine hopes to use Ecclesiastes' stark pessimism to draw us towards the equalizing and sterilizing power of God, Hobbes gives a more honest take on Ecclesiastes, quoting Chapter Three, Verses Twenty and Twenty-One that "All go (man and beast) to the same place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again..."<sup>12</sup> Note that the emphasis of "man and beast" is an inclusion on the part of Hobbes.

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<sup>7</sup> Ranston, Harry. *Ecclesiastes and the Early Greek Wisdom Literature*. Epwroth Press, 1925.

<sup>8</sup> Alter, Robert. *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes: A Translation with Commentary*. W.W. Norton, 2010. Pg 338.

<sup>9</sup> Augustine, and R. W. Dyson. *The City of God Against the Pagans*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Book XVII, Chapter Twenty.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, Book XX, Chapter Three.

<sup>11</sup> Augustine serves as an interesting example of the Western preoccupation with the political in his own right. Most obviously, in his *City of God* Augustine explicitly chooses a political frame of reference to present his teachings on the soul. In framing the business of God in the language of the mundane Augustine seems to exalt political life, even though much of his actual teachings equally appear to diminish it.

<sup>12</sup> Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan: With Selected Variants from the Latin Edition of 1668*. Hackett Publishing, 1994. Chapter XLIV, Paragraph 24.

In traditional Hobbesian fashion, Hobbes here seek to minimize the gulf between man and beast, and more importantly between man and natural existence itself. What is particularly interesting is the context of Hobbes's discussion of Ecclesiastes. Both here and in the Latin Appendix to the *Leviathan* Hobbes introduces Ecclesiastes in relation to the nature of the immateriality and immortality of the soul, and in the later section, directly in relation to a discussion of Plato on the subject. While he does not do us the favor of directly drawing the parallel himself, the matter at hand draws us directly back towards the *Phaedo*.

Hobbes attempts to relate Ecclesiastes and Plato as it regards the immortality of the soul, but at a more fundamental level the connection between the two is not simply about the nature of the soul but of death itself. Socrates tells us in the *Phaedo* that the act of philosophy is the same as learning to die. Socrates in facing death, at least to the faces of his friends, speaks bravely that the philosopher can somehow conquer death. Qohelet speaks to us in terms eerily reminiscent of Socrates, "The wise men's heart is in the house of mourning..."<sup>13</sup> For both Socrates, Qohelet, and the Buddha wisdom is somehow inextricably linked to death. Yet as much as wisdom surpasses folly, the wise dies the same as the fool.

It is here in the leveling of all things, man and animal, good and evil, that Ecclesiastes begins to move away from Hebrew/Christian and Greek thought towards the East and Buddhism. This connection between Ecclesiastes and Buddhism is not an original notion, though it has also not widely been explored. Ecclesiastes holds an odd distinction of being a favored book of both secular thinkers and those who wish to bridge the chasm of inter-faith relations. As early as 1895, E.J. Dillon made the claim the Ecclesiastes and Buddhist thought hold the same metaphysical premises.<sup>14</sup> Ecclesiastes' heterodox nature within the Judeo-Christian canon does

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<sup>13</sup> *Ecclesiastes*, Chapter 7, Verse 4.

<sup>14</sup> Dillon, E. J. *The Sceptics of the Old Testament*. Isbister and Company Limited, 1895. Pg 7.

not seem so out of line when it is viewed with an eye to the East. Daniel Polish argues that reorienting ourselves to view Ecclesiastes “through the lens of the life and teaching of Gautama the Buddha” actually allows for meaningful interpretations of Ecclesiastes beyond claims of simple hedonism or nihilistic pessimism.<sup>15</sup> Buddhism as a lens for Ecclesiastes, he argues, has the ability to reframe the seemingly excessively dour character of Ecclesiastes into a useful tool in the Buddhist soteriological project of escaping the suffering of existence. Seere Lorgunpai echoes Dillon’s claim of a common metaphysical basis between Ecclesiastes and the Buddha. In his analysis, both Ecclesiastes and the Buddha are preoccupied with existence, finding it filled with evil. They differ however in their approach to dealing with this existential crisis. According to Lorgunpai, Qohelet sees the futility of existence and counsels man to embrace what pleasures he can find in it. Conversely, the Buddha understands the nature of existence in a surprisingly similar matter, but counsels precisely the opposite of Ecclesiastes, prescribing a distancing from wants and pleasures as a means to end suffering. As Lorgunpai would have it, “Qohelet is the world lover. The Buddha is the world leaver.”<sup>16</sup>

Ecclesiastes likely presents as close to a Buddhist perspective as can in be found in the traditional Western canon. Though there is some differing in their respective conclusions, both the Buddha and Qohelet seem to agree that existence in and of itself should be lowered as greatly as possible within the scope of the human intellect. This is a conclusion with which neither ancient nor modern Western political thought can agree. This observation remains true when extended to the realm of the political.

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<sup>15</sup> Polish, Daniel. “The Buddha as a Lens for Reading Koheleth/Ecclesiastes.” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 43: 370-382. 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Lorgunpai, Seere. “World Lover, World Leaver: The Book of Ecclesiastes and Thai Buddhism.” Dissertation. University of Edinburgh, 1995.

## **The Value of Buddhist Political Thought to the West**

The elements of the Buddhist critique of Western political thought are clear, but what positive counsel can Buddhist political thought offer to the West? First, it seems likely that Buddhism is not a lens through which we can simply view Western political thought and hope to adjust it along the margins. The Buddhist understanding of political thought is nothing if not a complete critique of the very foundations of Western political thought. That said, there are significant areas where the perspectives overlap, particularly when viewing the West in light of the division between antiquity and modernity. Generally speaking, the most pressing difference between Buddhist political thought and that of the West (both ancient and modern) is the ability of Buddhist political thought to take a decidedly *apolitical* stance. Buddhist political thought, even at its most political, concerns itself first and foremost with the requirements of Buddhism, only viewing politics as a secondary matter which flows from this initial concern. Western political thought, premised not on religious claims but on rational claims, places a fundamental primacy on the value of the political, and molds its understanding of political life to fit this basis. Buddhism is able to sidestep the Western tension of the theologico-political problem. It does so by denying that the two are meaningful sparring partners to begin with. Unlike the Abrahamic faiths, Buddhism lacks a drive to “reconstruct the mundane world...according to the appropriate transcendental vision.”<sup>17</sup> When the political component issues a challenge to the Buddhist component, it is not so much defeated as it is shooed away. Buddhism does not need to address the problem of faith and reason because it denies the premises which make it a meaningful issue in Western thought to begin with.

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<sup>17</sup> Jayasuriya, Laksiri. “Buddhism, Politics, and Statecraft.” *International Journal of Buddhist Thought and Culture* 11: 41-74. 2008. Pg 42.

Buddhist political theory can only be understood as a function of the larger Buddhist project. In this regard, Buddhist political theory mirrors the larger pragmatic Buddhist conception of truth. Buddhist practice is found in so many variations precisely because there is no expectation of standardization. There is no understanding of best practices in the Buddhist project of enlightenment. There are methods which work better than others for some, but the importance is placed on the end of reaching enlightenment rather than on the means of doing so. We see this understanding echoed in the Buddhist presentation of politics. In the *Mahāparinibbāṇa Sutta* the idea is introduced that much as there is no best method to enlightenment, there is equally no best regime. While some regimes may work better than others in the majority of circumstances, the act of governing must be undertaken with a concern for the necessities of the situation. The rule fitting for the devout will likely not be adequate for the coarse masses. The Buddha prescribes kingship in the *Mahāparinibbāṇa Sutta*, but refused kingship for himself in practice and created an egalitarian *sangha* for his original followers. This is not hypocrisy on the part of the Buddha, nor is it evidence of moral hierarchy and elitism. It is simply an acknowledgement of pragmatic realities.

This understanding rings harshly on the modern ear. This distinction feels like a movement towards relativism at best, and the beginnings of a defense of totalitarianism at worst. If any regime is justifiable given particular circumstances, and no absolute judgment can be made between regimes, then it would seem that anything is now on the table. Yet this conclusion is not quite the case. The political philosophy which the Buddha presents shares at least one key point of overlap with liberalism. This presentation of Buddhist political thought, by focusing on the necessity of targeted special action, takes the individual as the fundamental component of analysis. While this appears to contradict the Buddhist principles of no-self, it

avoids this criticism in a very particular way. Hobbes and the Western moderns also take the individual as their object. But, with the exception of Rousseau, they then do all they can to immediately de-individualize the individual and throw him into a political condition. They view man as an individual, but only insofar as he is an individual amongst other individuals. The individual is an epistemological foundation for their political theory, but the reality of their understanding of politics as inescapable forces this individual to be viewed almost solely in light of his relationship to others. Where antiquity views political life as natural, the moderns understand it as artificial. But they decidedly don't view it as escapable. Even when beginning with an atomized man, they all (including the reluctant Rousseau) understand political life as a self-propelling force which will come into existence whether we like it or not.

Buddhism is capable of viewing the individual in a different fashion. The individual needn't be viewed as though he were in a spotlight, signaling one out from among many in a crowd in the hope of temporarily drowning out observations about the rest. Buddhist political ontology is such that man can be viewed as though he were a purely atomized individual, even though he exists in a political condition<sup>18</sup>. This is because Buddhist political thought does not view man as an object of political determinism. There is no inexorable force which draws man into political life and binds him there. That we all happen to live together is more an accident than anything, and there certainly isn't an imperative to create a perfect political life, as to do so distracts from the larger project. Given that we *are* all together, certain realities need to be dealt with, but this is more a burden than a political project. Western political thought maintains that man needs political life to reach his highest end. The Buddha makes no such claim. Political life

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<sup>18</sup> Even this language of individuation in relation to Buddhism is an anachronism of Western thought. While Buddhism understands individuals to exist in the mundane sense, Buddhist ontology ascribes to a doctrine of *anatta*, or a theory of no-self. Buddhism maintains that the "self" as it is conceived of in the West is ultimately an illusion. There is an explicit rejection of anything like the Western understanding of an eternal soul.

is incidental to the human condition, and damaging more than helpful. Buddhist political thought agrees with Aristotle that different types of people have different political needs, but it does not agree that there is ultimately a best regime. The perfect regime in Buddhist political thought is any regime which leads one towards enlightenment,<sup>19</sup> and the nature of what that regimes entails can vary widely from place to place and even from person to person.

### **Buddhism as a Defense Against Ideology**

The most practicable advice to be taken from Buddhist political thought by the West is a call to move towards an acceptance of broad political pragmatism and away from rigid ideological thought. We see this diminishing of the role of ideology and ideological thought throughout the Buddhist tradition, both ancient and modern. Beyond the denial of the existence of an objectively best regime in the *Mahāparinibbāṇa Sutta*, the fluid Buddhist conception of truth as based on that which leads to the *dhamma*, even things which seemingly contradict the teachings of the Buddha himself, demonstrates a clear stance against rigid systems of thought and belief. In contemporary Buddhist thought, we see an explicit denouncement of ideology in the writing of Thích Nhất Hạnh. The very first of his principles in *Interbeing* speaks directly to the problem of ideology. He opens his commentaries on mindfulness as follows, “Aware of the suffering created by fanaticism and intolerance, we are determined not to be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even Buddhist ones.”<sup>20</sup> He explains further that “The

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<sup>19</sup> It is here that we can find the defense against the earlier claims of Buddhist indifference towards fascism. Buddhist political thought would perhaps not be against the idea of totalitarian rule in principle, at least insofar as we regard it only as a mechanism of rule. Where the Buddhist would reject fascist regimes is in their actions, not in their construction. Any number of actions taken by the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century would explicitly violate the principles of the Eight-fold Path, which forbids cruelty, murder, and theft, among other wrongs. Buddhism is thus on solid intellectual footing to defend against Nazism, while at the same time leaving room to agree with Plato in the virtues of the rule of the good king.

<sup>20</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh. *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism*. Edited by Fred Eppsteiner, Parallax Press, 1998. Pg 17.

Buddha regarded his own teachings as a raft to cross the river and not as an absolute truth to be worshipped or clung to. He said this to prevent rigid dogmatism or fanaticism from taking root. Ideological inflexibility is responsible for so much of the conflict and violence in the world.”<sup>21</sup> Viewed in this light, the nature of the ideological flexibility at the core of Buddhist teachings runs deeper than even the singular teachings of the Buddha himself. The truth of the Buddhist *dhamma* hinges on the notion that perhaps the only way that it *cannot* be reached is through a dogged and inflexible clinging to one frame of thought, even that of the Buddha himself.

In the West, the problem of ideology has defined the last century of political thought and conflict. The rise of the ideologically-based totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century created a crisis for Western modernity. What is important to understand about these regimes as it regards Buddhism’s critique of Western political thought is the nature of the void which the rise of these regimes sought to fill. These regimes were not merely products of mundane political life but were the political expression of the decayed spirit of Western modernity. The totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century arose to fill a void in man which was created by his turning away from the transcendent nature of reality.<sup>22</sup> The totalitarian politics of the twentieth century were not simply matters of political regimes but of political religions. Modernity has been characterized by a detachment of the spiritual and the political. In the absence of this connection man does not lose his longing for a connection to transcendent reality but instead seeks a substitute to replace it. The totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century latched upon this void, harnessing man’s longing and filling the vacuum with their own ideologies. Though they may not have presented themselves as such, the true destructive nature of the force of the political systems of fascism and communism was in their respective abilities to detach man from the

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., Pg 23.

<sup>22</sup> See: Voegelin, Eric. *Hitler and the Germans*. University of Missouri Press, 1999.



nature of his true existence by substituting for authentic transcendence an ersatz substitute built upon the exaltation of the state. Within the Western context, this project of substituting the apparent transcendence offered by political ideologies for religious transcendence makes good sense. The void created by the collapse of religious faith was going to be filled by something, and with the primacy of the political being an already present facet of Western thought it was the obvious candidate to fill the space. We find the most insightful critique of this condition in the thought of Eric Voegelin. Voegelin argued that ideological understandings of reality serve to obscure man's connection to the divine ground of being, the oneness which connects humanity on a spiritual level and justifies our common humanity. Ideologies, in obscuring these foundations, create a "second reality" which replaces the goal of actual human fulfillment with the promise of utopian perfection in the here and now through the use of political ends.

With the end of World War II and the eventual fall of the Soviet Union, it was declared that this issue of the rule of ideology had been rendered moot. David Walsh, a disciple of Voegelin's critique of modernity, announced in his 1990 book *After Ideology* that "The collapse [of the ideological regimes] has been so decisive that that it is no longer possible, outside a few revolutionary enclaves, to be taken seriously as a thinker if one is an ideologist."<sup>23</sup> Two years later Francis Fukuyama went so far to declare a figurative end to history, based on the notion that liberal democracy had decisively won the battle of hearts, minds, and ideas.<sup>24</sup> Both have been proven conclusively wrong in the years since their writing. While the face of ideology may have changed, it has not been as decisively defeated as was once believed. The politics of the early twenty-first century have been defined by the struggle of the West against radicalized, politicized

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<sup>23</sup> Walsh, David. *After Ideology: Recovering the Spiritual Foundations of Freedom*. Catholic University of America Press, 1995. Pg 10.

<sup>24</sup> Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and the Last Man*. Free Press, 1992.

Islam. We can see further evidence of the remnants of ideology in the slow movement back towards authoritarianism in the former Soviet Union and in the state-worshipping practices of regimes like North Korea. Yet not all ideologies find expression on such a large scale. Closer to home, there has been a more modest movement undertaken by opposing ideological factions within contemporary American political life, divided nominally on issues such as free speech and the presidency of Donald Trump, setting the “regressive left” against the “alt-right.” These new political divisions, premised on tribalistic identitarian grounds and pitting groups against each solely as a function of their group identity, echo the identitarian rhetoric of wartime Europe. While the current stakes are decidedly lower than the political troubles of the twentieth century, this divide is evidence nonetheless of a nascent ideological problem. The West may have briefly escaped the problem of ideology, but it appears that the problem is being reintroduced anew, both from the outside and from the rejection of its key principles from within. In all cases, the dangers arise from a dogmatic certainty of one’s claims and the belief that politics can and should be harnessed to remake reality in one’s own preferred image. There is no understanding here of the inherent limitations of man and his political life in bringing about perfection as they conceive it.

When viewing the problem of ideology, Buddhist political thought resembles the critique of modernity presented by Eric Voegelin, albeit approached from a different direction.<sup>25</sup> The Buddhist critique is nearly identical, though it runs far deeper. Voegelin argued that political ideology obscured man’s rightful understanding of himself. For Buddhism, it is not just political ideology which obscures our greater project, but rather politics itself. Sheri Berman bolsters this

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<sup>25</sup> Voegelin briefly mentions Buddhism throughout his sweeping work *The Ecumenic Age*. While references are limited, Voegelin seems inclined to believe that the Buddha was undertaking a project similar to his own, describing the Buddha’s project as “a response to the tension in reality” and insinuating that the Buddha was aware of the underlying transcendent nature of being. Voegelin, Eric. *The Ecumenic Age*. Pg 402.

claim, placing the primacy of politics as a key factor in the intellectual rise of the ideological regimes of the twentieth century.<sup>26</sup> From the Buddhist perspective, even the seemingly more benign Western preoccupation with the discovery of the best regimes is no different than Voegelin's more specific critique of ideologies. Buddhist political thought is not interested in establishing a "new science of politics" as is Voegelin, but instead a rejection of the entire enterprise.

Yet shy of this radical break, there are still lessons which can be gleaned. Primary among them is the call to philosophically lessen the force of politics within the large scope of reality. The larger a role politics maintains in the minds of men, the further they are from action which edifies enlightenment. A Western politics softened by the lessons of Buddhist political thought allows for an avenue to view the origins of the destructive political forces of ideology of the twentieth century which mirrors that of Voegelin but which cuts much deeper to the roots of the problem. Voegelin's project of controlling political ideologies is solved, but only by working to remove the soil of political life in which they grow. While a total deflation of political life within the Western paradigm is not a reasonable goal, as this would require a near total abandonment of the entire paradigm itself, a meaningful lesson can be gained from the Buddhist critique of Western political thought in the acknowledgment of the dangers of rigidity and the ultimate destructive power of ideology. The Buddhist project of enlightenment, by pointing man away from the primacy of the political, offers an alternative to the ideologies and political religions which have proven so destructive to modern political life. In fundamentally reorienting the Western understanding of the value of politics, Buddhist political thought offers a new view to Leo Strauss's seemingly binary question of progress or return.

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<sup>26</sup> Berman, Sheri. *The Primacy of Politics: Social Democracy and the Making of Europe's Twentieth Century*. Cambridge University Press, 2010.

## Conclusion

Buddhist thought approaches the issue of politics from a fundamentally different position than its Western counterpart. This is not simply a matter of differing metaphysical and philosophic premises, but of the value that it places in the role of politics as a means to affect the human condition. Since Plato, philosophy in the West has viewed the role of politics as primary. Politics is an extension of man's reason, and in this way is a principal extension of his character. While the political thought of modernity may deny Aristotle's claim that man is by nature a political animal, it makes no claim that political life is any less fundamental. On the contrary, where we do not have politics, we must create it or risk the consequences.

Conversely, Buddhist politics views itself as the danger to man, not its lack thereof. The standards of Buddhism's judgment of political action are not objective nor are they based in a rational assessment. Buddhism's judgment of politics is strictly instrumental, made on the basis of its danger in relation to the Buddhist soteriological project of enlightenment. To act politically is to place some end in front of the goal of the release from *samsāra*. It is a distraction from the *dhamma*. But it is a necessary reality of human existence nonetheless. Accordingly, traditional Buddhist political thought cordons the proper expression of politics into a tiny, elite space of action. Political action is only justified as a means to point others towards enlightenment, to the detriment of one's own quest. It is a politics based on duty. But though it is expressed as a means to help others, the object of this duty is not men themselves. The duty of the Buddhist political actor is to the *dhamma* of the Buddha and his teachings. All Buddhist political action must be viewed in this light. It is Buddhist action before it is political action.

Contrasted with the history of the Western tradition, where even explicitly religious projects like that of St. Augustine in *The City of God* are couched in overtly political terms, the

extent of Buddhist political thought's radical stance towards the role of politics in human life becomes clear. The Judeo-Christian tradition, which provided the religious backbone for Western political life in much the same way that Buddhism informed that of much of Asia, has a well-established political tradition in its own right, both textual and practical. Politics are not merely incidental in the biblical texts. And though they may not be man's prime focus, they are equally not viewed as destructive. Lacking this historical foundation, projects like that of the secular Buddhist movement face a unique challenge compared to similarly minded movements in favor of secularization and liberalization in the West. The movement towards the secularization of society undertaken during the rise of liberalism did not necessitate the creation of a new political language in order to reconcile the rift between the political and religious spheres. Hobbes was able to quote the Bible throughout the *Leviathan*, employing one language to address both the divine and the profane.

As the Buddhist world confronts the demands of modern liberal society, the problem of this lack of a natural language to reconcile the realms of religion and political life is becoming more evident. We see this across the contemporary Buddhist political world, be it in the liberal rhetoric of Aung San Suu Kyi cribbed from the tradition of Western political thought or in Thích Nhất Hạnh's use of Western political concepts such as freedom and justice to help justify his project of engaged Buddhist mindfulness. When Buddhists wish to speak of politics, particularly in the context of modern liberal society, they cannot turn towards the language of their own tradition to adequately do so. However, to maintain the integrity of the Buddhist stance that politics is only rightfully understood as a handmaiden to the *dhamma*, they equally cannot step too far beyond the traditional metaphysics and philosophic conceptions of the Buddhist tradition. This leaves the Buddhist practitioner who also seeks to be political actor in the modern

globalized political sphere in an untenable situation. Similarly, it leaves the standing of Buddhist political theory in an equally untenable position. For a state built on a tradition of Buddhist political practice to move into the sphere of modern liberal politics, it must make itself available to the requirements of pluralistic, liberal political life. That this project can be accomplished while maintaining a traditional Buddhist stance on the nature and value of politics is unlikely. To enter the contemporary global political sphere is to accept, even if tacitly, that politics and political life is the primary avenue for man's betterment. This statement cannot be supported on Buddhist grounds. Traditionally Buddhist states, if they truly wish to globally integrate, are left to decide which they value more, the liberalism of the modern West or the Buddhism of their traditional past.

## GLOSSARY OF SELECTED BUDDHIST TERMS

**Aggañña Sutta-** text from the *Digha Nikaya* of the Pāli Canon; serves as something of a creation myth, describing the decline and reconstitution of the world and in doing so gives a picture of the origins of political commitment and authority.

**Anatta-** “no-self” or “without substance”; denies the existence of an individuated self or ego, one of the three marks of existence, along with *dukkha* and *anicca*.

**Anicca-** doctrine of impermanence; notion that all of existence is transient and in a constant condition of flux; one of the three marks of existence, along with *dukkha* and *anatta*.

**Arahant-** someone who has gained insight into the nature of existence and has become fully enlightened.

**Asoka-** Indian monarch in third century BCE; converted to Buddhism and subsequently worked to bring his kingdom in line with Buddhist principles; responsible for much of the early spread of Buddhist principles.

**Atta-** self; conceptually pre-dates the Buddhist notion of *anatta* (“no-self”), which serves as its philosophic negation in Buddhist thought.

**Bodhisattva-** one who chooses to direct their life in the direction of Buddhahood and in some instances, having achieved enlightenment, chooses to forestall release from *samsāra* in order to help other achieve the same, done so in the name of wisdom and compassion.

**Brahmin-** members of the highest, priestly class of the ancient Indian caste system; a fundamental teaching of the Buddha was to deny their stature as inherently superior, focusing instead on the notion that only action can rightly correspond with true standing.

**Cakkavatti-** “wheel-turning monarch”, describing a universal ruler who furthers the “wheel of *dhamma*” by ruling in line with Buddhist principles.

**Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta-** text from the *Digha Nikaya* of the Pāli Canon; gives a guide to the correct ruling action of kings; relays a story of kings who fail to rule in line with *dhamma*, the subsequent decay of society, and the rejuvenation of society once these principles are once-again adopted.

**Dasavidha-rājadhamma-** “ten virtues of the ruler”; list of principles meant to be upheld by Buddhist rulers, including charity, morality, altruism, honesty, gentleness, self-control, non-anger, non-violence, patience, and respect for others.

**Dhamma (Sanskrit: dharma)-** the true nature of reality underlying the teachings of the Buddha; can take on various other meanings depending on the context, such as law, justice, or virtue.

**Digha Nikaya-** the “long discourses” of the greater Pāli Canon; contains the vast majority of the Buddha’s prescriptive political teachings, including the *Aggañña Sutta*, *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta*, *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, and *Mahāsudassana Sutta*.

**Dukkha (Sanskrit: *duḥkha*)-** suffering; refers to the underlying condition of want and ignorance which forces us to maintain our involvement in the cycle of *samara*; one of the one of the three marks of existence, along with *anicca* and *anatta*; the first of the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths.

**Eight-fold Path-** the prescriptive actions given by the Buddha to lead towards liberation and escape from the cycle of *saṃsāra*; the final of the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths.

**Four Noble Truths-** the fundamental teachings given by the Buddha on the nature of our existence and how we can become liberated from it; describes (1) *dukkha* (suffering), (2) how suffering arises in man, (3) declares that if we understand how suffering arises, we can also come to end it, and (4) describes how to end this suffering through the use of the Eight-fold Path.

**Jataka Tales-** stories describing the lives of the previous incarnations of the Buddha.

**Kamma (Sanskrit: *karma*)-** literally means “action”; cumulative effects of man’s actions either in line or against the *dhamma*, which subsequently power the cycle of *samara*.

**Karuṇā-** compassion.

**Khanda-** the aggregated collection of matter (*rūpa*) and mind (*nama*); approximates a Western understanding of an individualized self on Buddhist terms.

**Mahāyāna-** one of the three major schools of Buddhist thought and practice, along with *Theravāda* and *Vajrayāna*; “The Great Vehicle”; understood as an expansion of earlier, more rigid teachings; contains within it various schools such as Zen and Pureland Buddhism; the largest of the major schools.

**Mahāparinibbāna Sutta-** text from the *Digha Nikaya* of the Pāli Canon; finds the Buddha giving political counsel to a King’s minister; describes a set of principles which many modern commentators have taken to demonstrate a preference for quasi-republican government, though is unclear that this advice is meant to be taken as applicable in all political conditions.

**Moksha-** liberation and release from the cycle of death and rebirth (*saṃsāra*); the ultimate end of the Buddhist soteriological project.

**Nibbana (Sanskrit: *nirvana*)-** literally “to blow out”; the condition of enlightenment and the release from the cycle of death and rebirth (*saṃsāra*).

**Pāli Canon-** the earliest texts of the Buddhist tradition, numbering some fifty-seven volumes; said to contain the direct and actual teachings of the Buddha; taken as scripture by adherents of the *Theravāda* tradition, but held in esteem by all Buddhist schools.



**Paramattha-sacca-** truth in an absolute sense, as opposed to *sammuti-sacca* (conventional truth).

**Prajñā-** wisdom; insight into the true nature of the *dhamma*.

**Sammuti-sacca-** conventional truth, as opposed to *paramattha-sacca* (absolute truth).

**Samsāra-** the cyclical process of death and rebirth; the process of enlightenment culminates in a release from this cycle.

**Sangha-** Buddhist community; traditionally usage refers to a formal community of monastic practitioners, but in modern usage has expanded to refer to the totality of Buddhist practitioners in a given region.

**Śāsana-** typically translated as “religion”; refers to the totality of the practice, teaching, and doctrine of Buddhism.

**Taṇhā-** desire or craving; that which causes *dukkha* (suffering).

**Taya-** in Burmese Buddhist practice, a wide-ranging understanding of truth which contains within it understandings of law, justice, and *dhamma*.

**Thakin-** Burmese, “master”; a semi-ironic honorific taken up by members of the radical political student movements of 1930s Burma, including U Nu and Aung San, as a send-up of official titles held by members of the British colonial regime.

**Thathanabaing-** head of the Burmese *sangha* in pre-colonial Burma; served in a quasi-political role in concert with the country’s monarchy.

**Tilakkhaṇa (Three Marks of Existence)-** the three characteristics which encompass the nature of being; comprised of *anatta* (no-self), *anicca* (impermanence), and *dukkha* (suffering).

**Theravāda-** one of the three major schools of Buddhist thought and practice, along with *Mahāyāna* and *Vajrayāna*; “The Teaching of the Elders”; oldest school of Buddhist practice.

**Tiratana (Three Treasures)-** also referred to as the Three Jewels or the Three Refuges; identifies the three principles components of Buddhist practice: the *Buddha* (enlightened one), the *dhamma* (the teachings of the Buddha), and the *sangha* (the community of Buddhist practitioners).

**Vajrayāna-** one of the three major schools of Buddhist thought and practice, along with *Mahāyāna* and *Theravāda*; “Diamond Vehicle”; youngest of the major schools (developed in the fourth century CE); characterized by esoteric practice.

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