

Buddhism and Democracy

WHAT IS THE RELATION between Buddhism and liberal democracy? Are they compatible frameworks for social value, which can somehow be joined to one another to gain a consistent whole? Or are they instead antagonistic, forcing those who would be Buddhist democrats into an uncomfortably choice between individually attractive but jointly unsatisfiable values? Or do they operate at entirely different levels of discourse so that questions regarding their relationship simply do not arise?

The question is important for several reasons: first, we indeed have in Buddhism and in liberal democratic theory two *prima facie* plausible frameworks for value, and their independent plausibility leads immediately to the question of their compatibility. Second, each framework has staked a claim to a central role in the global quest for human rights and justice, and indeed partisans of each have used the other in defense of their respective frameworks. Third, the Tibetan government in exile has formulated a national charter explicitly grounded in a Buddhist view of moral and social life and espousing a liberal democratic social ideology. It would be nice to know whether that vision is coherent. Fourth, the perennial debate between proponents of the universality of the liberal vision and those suggesting that liberalism is incompatible with "Asian values" might move forward if it turned out that at least one major Asian tradition is compatible with liberal democracy, or on the other hand that there is a fundamental incompatibility between these two systems.

In this essay I argue that not only are Buddhism and liberal democracy compatible, but that they are complementary in a deep sense: democracy, I argue, is strengthened by values drawn from Buddhist moral and social theory, and Buddhist moral and social theory gains concrete institutional and procedural specificity when it is articulated through the framework of liberal democratic theory.

The terms *Buddhism* and *liberal democracy* are each, to be sure, vague, and I will be painting throughout this essay with a broad brush. Nonetheless, I will explain how I understand these terms for present purposes. My conception of

liberal democracy is that of the social contract tradition, and more particularly that of Locke, Kant, and Rawls. Its central tenets regarding the distinction between public and private and the centrality of individual rights are articulated in Mill's *On Liberty*, in Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, and are enshrined in the United States Constitution. To be sure, these texts do not speak on all issues with a single voice, but they indicate a clear and coherent vision of the nature of justice, of the primacy of fundamental individual rights in justice, and of the primacy also of justice over any particular conception of the good. They also indicate a need for any just society to tolerate a plurality of conceptions of the good and of the responsibility of government to its populace.

The Buddhism I have in mind is the Mahāyāna tradition of moral theory, comprising and extending the Pali tradition of morality as expressed in the eight-fold path by the addition of the Bodhisattva ideal and the six perfections as providing an analysis of human moral perfection. More specifically, I have in mind that tradition as it is understood and expounded in medieval India and Tibet by such figures as Āryadeva, Śāntideva, and Tsong khapa. But I will also draw on insights from contemporary scholars and activists in the so-called "Engaged Buddhist" movement, whose work is in the spirit of this tradition. Again, this tradition is not homogenous, but the conceptual space it marks out is coherent enough for present purposes. This is not so much an exercise in exegesis as it is in deploying the insights I find in these traditions. Indeed, given the contemporary context of the problematic with which I am concerned, it will often be the case that the implications I draw from the Buddhist tradition would not have been considered by classical scholars.

THE DIVISION OF THEORETICAL LABOR

I first note that in a strictly formal sense, Buddhism and democracy are mutually independent. Buddhism neither precludes nor entails liberal democracy; liberal democracy neither precludes nor entails Buddhism. Buddhism—and by this term I understand the doctrine presented in the *suttas* of the Pali canon and developed in the Indian Mahāyāna *śāstras*, insofar as this doctrine can be relatively uncontroversially identified—is generally silent about social institutions and forms of government. In the first instance it is a doctrine about the good life for the individual and about the values, practices, traits of character, states of mind, and view of reality that conduce to the liberation of the individual from suffering. Though this is elaborated in the Mahāyāna into an altruistic doctrine, Buddhist theory for the most part remains resolutely a theory about individual life and practice.

There are two classes of exceptions to this generalization, one of which will turn out to be important for our project. First, there is the *vinaya-pitaka*, devoted in good measure to the elaboration of the social and administrative structures for

the Buddhist *sangha*, or monastic community. While this might appear to be the right place to begin an inquiry into the relation between Buddhism and democracy, inasmuch as the *vinaya-pitaka* comprises the most explicitly sociopolitical of all Buddhist scriptures, here we find discussion of the method of choice of leaders of the assembly, of the method for deciding community membership, of resolving disputes, and so on. But there are compelling reasons for *not* starting here as well: the *vinaya* is a code formulated explicitly and solely for the governance of a voluntary, celibate, ideologically homogenous monastic community. Liberal democracy gets its very point from the presumption of heterogeneity, and from the need to adjudicate disputes and to formulate institutions and policies in circumstances where the option of removal from the community is not present. If Buddhism and liberal democracy are to be joined or compared, it must be on this more secular terrain.

This brings us to the second body of literature, considerably smaller in size: the corpus of Buddhist advice to rulers, of which Nāgārjuna's "Letter to a Friend" and "*Ratnāvalī*" are the best examples. Here we find direct advice grounded in Buddhist moral values regarding the ruling of a state. And from this literature two general salient points emerge (as well as a number of more specific points with which we will be concerned later): first, Buddhism has *nothing* to say about the appropriate *form* of government. Nāgārjuna's letters are addressed to *kings*. But in these letters we find neither a conservative royalist defense of monarchy nor a revolutionary tract calling for a democratic order. Nāgārjuna is silent about these matters, focusing instead on the goods the state must deliver: hospitals, roadside resthouses, good water supply, care for animals, schools, and so on. Buddhism emerges in these texts as a theory about the good, silent about procedures, except for the general implicit proviso that only procedures capable of facilitating the pursuit of that good are legitimate. But with respect to the good, Buddhism has a lot to say: the goal of any social order, on a Buddhist view, is the maximization of happiness, the minimization of suffering, the provision for the least advantaged and the cultivation of traits of character such as compassion, patience, generosity, and wisdom. If a monarchy can do this, fine. If a democracy can accomplish that, fine, too.

Liberal democratic theory—that is, the democratic theory of the social contract tradition as handed down from Locke through Jefferson to Mill to Rawls—is, by contrast, relatively silent about the good, but quite articulate and specific about social institutions and procedures. Indeed, liberal democracy—while to be sure embodying some specific values relative to social good, values that I will discuss later in this chapter—is self-consciously minimalist with respect to such commitments. This, indeed, is one of its strengths, and part of the genius of the liberal democratic tradition is the insight that procedures themselves can be legitimized independently of many nonprocedural values and that legitimate procedures can legitimate both institutions and conceptions of the good.

Now, the contrast between Buddhism and liberalism on this score can easily be overstated, and it is important to be careful here. It is neither true that Buddhism is devoid of procedural ideas nor that liberalism is bereft of specific values or conceptions of the good life or the good social order. Each tradition embodies commitments of both types, and indeed it would be a conceptual impossibility for a moral framework to be either entirely substantive or entirely procedural in content. Procedures reflect substantive values and vice versa. And indeed these values at the extremes must be mutually constraining. This is evident, for example, in constitutional protections of some values against ready change, however democratic the procedure.

The contrast, however, is real, and can be properly emphasized in two ways: first, the respective orders of legitimation for the two traditions are *toto genere* distinct. Liberal democratic theory legitimates its goods on procedural grounds; Buddhism legitimates any procedures on the grounds that they produce appropriate goods. Second, and related, procedures of particular kinds are constitutive of liberal democracy, whereas commitments to particular social goods are constitutive of Buddhist societies in very deep ways: whereas liberal democratic societies may differ widely (or one may change wildly over time) with respect to some particular vision of the good (say free education, universal health care, or a minimum wage) and remain recognizably democratic, any society that abandoned election, open access to offices, or transparency of the judicial process would ipso facto no longer count as a liberal democracy. (There is, however, also a sense in which a specific conception of the good is built into most Western liberal democracies beyond the necessary implication of some minimal conception of the good by the procedural commitments and by the initial presuppositions of the contractual situation: most liberals—whether they acknowledge it or not—tacitly supplement democratic principles with a heavy dose of Judeo-Christian values, including the presumption of human dominion over the earth, of the sanctity of individual property, of the primacy of individuals over collectives, of the legitimacy of violence in the service of a legitimate cause, among others, which are called upon [sometimes in suitably secularized language, sometimes in the original] in policymaking or in the adjudication of institutions to fill in the gaps left by liberal theory. A Tibetan student once asked in a class on Locke's political philosophy, "Do you have to be a Christian to take this theory of property and natural rights seriously?" Maybe.)

Similarly, while some Buddhist societies might be monarchies and others democratic, or the same one might change its form of government over time and remain recognizably Buddhist, any society that abandoned commitment to non-violence, to maintaining the welfare of the least advantaged, to providing health care and education to all its citizens, and to facilitating spiritual practice for those who aspire thereto would cease to be recognizably Buddhist.

For these reasons we can treat Buddhism and liberal democracy as diametrically opposed on one issue, namely, the direction of legitimation as between procedure and conception of the good. But this does not entail that they are therefore incapable of fusion. Legitimation, after all, might not in the end have a foundational structure: it might well be that procedures and conceptions of the good are mutually reinforcing. In fact this is a picture we will suggest. But these observations suggest more by way of a strategy for social and political philosophy—a division of theoretical labor: a Buddhist democratic theory needs, after all, a theory both of the good and of the political institutions capable of and appropriate to realizing that good. Why not, then, turn to Buddhism for the former task, and liberal democratic theory for the latter? I propose to do just that, allowing each body of theory to do what it does best, with the hope that we will end up with a consistent set of institutions and social objectives that lend normative support to each other. As we shall see, however, it will not be enough simply to spell out independently the demands and content of each theory and to join them by the word *and*. To show their deep theoretical connection and affinity, I will turn to the explicitly Buddhist notion of *upāya*—of skilful means—as a mediating concept.

BUDDHIST IDEALS FOR A SOCIETY

From the fundamentals of Buddhist moral theory as articulated in the *sūtras* and *śāstras* we can distill several specific components of a theory of social good: first, social institutions should aim at maximizing happiness and minimizing suffering for all members of society. In particular, given Buddhist egalitarian concerns and given the content of compassion, social institutions should aim at equity in distribution and opportunity and especially at the minimization of suffering for the least advantaged.

The Buddhist doctrine of the *pañcāśīla*, or five ethical precepts for laypersons, adds to the Buddhist conception of social institutions and conceptions of the good: these precepts enjoin refraining from killing, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct, and intoxication. Put together and viewed in a social context, they together constitute advice against violence and actions likely to sow discord and favor openness and integrity. These more general values can inform the development of social institutions. If we were to read them too narrowly and apply them crudely as instruments of social policy, it might seem that they require not only the criminalization of homicide, theft, and perjury, but also the prohibition of alcohol and a strict code of sexual conduct. But this would be far too narrow a reading and in any case fail to see the values that underlie this moral code and their relevance to social theory.

What do killing, theft, intoxication, sexual misconduct, and lying have in common that they should be brought together as *the* five things any person is ad-

monished to forswear? Just this: all are either directly violent or are seeds of violence. The fundamental value thus reflected in this code is nonviolence, and the obvious application to social philosophy is that political institutions and policies should themselves be nonviolent and directed primarily to the eradication of violence in society.¹ Spelling out the content of this prescription is, of course, not a trivial task and must remain outside the scope of this chapter. But the sense of the fundamental value should be clear.

Buddhist moral literature distinguishes a number of important human virtues or perfections of character. Given that we are asking from Buddhism a conception of social good, and given that for Buddhism society can only be seen instrumentally as a mechanism for ensuring the good of individuals, it follows that social institutions should, from a Buddhist perspective, encourage, develop, and foster these virtues. A brief list of these would include prominently generosity, patience, wisdom, moderation, and nonattachment. Buddhist moral theory can best be characterized as a concern with certain *vastus*—areas of importance in conduct, traits of character, and ranges of behavior on which one should focus in worrying about one's moral development, and not as a set of imperatives or specific prescriptions. Now since Buddhist literature is so sparse when it comes to very specific advice on social institutions or policies, I—simply spelling out the way that Buddhist and democratic theory can be joined—will allow myself to be even more reserved. That is, I will not venture here a specific set of recommendations for how political arrangements might encourage, develop, and foster these virtues. But I can say a few things to indicate the direction that such an account might take.

Social structures and institutions that reflect ideals build consensus regarding the probity of those ideals. Protection of the freedom of speech, for instance, not only reflects the view that speech should be free but encourages that value in those who dwell in societies with such policies. Generous social programs and programs conducive to equity will not only reflect but encourage values such as generosity and moderation. Policies creating shared public goods and enabling their enjoyment without the amassing of private wealth will generate nonattachment. The facilitation of education will encourage the development of wisdom. Public disarmament will conduce to private nonviolence and so forth.

Moreover, since the Buddhist ideals I here take seriously include those of the Mahāyāna, Buddhist social institutions and political arrangements should presume and cultivate a sense of responsibility for others. This requirement would most obviously find expression in the requirement for extensive health and welfare services as the primary brief of government but would extend to the establishment of service agencies involving substantial numbers of citizens, perhaps involving a civil service force in which all or most would serve at some time.

THE FORMAL PROMISE OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

We have seen that Buddhism provides a rich positive conception of social goods and of the values a political system ought to reflect and encourage. What does liberal democratic theory bring to the table? A lot, of course: it demands a respect for a basic set of universal human rights, prominently including the right to vote for those who will hold significant government offices; the right to free speech and expression broadly conceived; the right to free religious expression and against the imposition of religious beliefs or practices; freedom from torture or unwarranted imprisonment or restriction of movement; the right to informational privacy and allied rights. All of these can be summed up as the right to participate without fetter in an open public sphere, and to be free from unwarranted interference in the private sphere.

To continue in the same vein, liberal democracy requires that institutions preserve and reflect the equal liberty of the citizens of the state and the rule of law and that all offices be open and all processes transparent. That is, special privileges or restrictions on citizens should result from fair allocation procedures; positions of authority should in principle be open to any citizen, and their occupants should be fairly chosen; all political and legal processes should be open to scrutiny and assessment, be fair, and have consensual support.

Also, pluralism is fundamental to the liberalism of any liberal democracy. Aside from the minimal set of values adumbrated above (perhaps plus or minus a few), liberalism is committed to impartiality among conceptions of the good and to providing each citizens with the liberty to pursue his or her own conception of the good, so long as that commitment does not trammel the rights of others. A consequence of this is that a liberal democracy will be committed to allowing the flourishing of a number of ideologically and axiologically distinct communities as part of a body politic, without either assisting or hampering in special ways any of these in its independent activities.

This brief outline of the central commitments of these two frameworks reinforces the sense that while they are not directly contradictory to one another, there is no obvious point of intersection between the two. If we were to leave the analysis at this point, it might then seem that while a Buddhist democratic theory is not impossible, it would at least be a peculiar accident and in no way conceptually motivated either by Buddhism or by liberal democracy. I now turn to a construct from within Buddhism that, I argue, provides the necessary link, that motivates specifically an attempt to forge Buddhist democratic theory.

UPĀYA AS A CONCEPTUAL BRIDGE

An important and insufficiently noticed conceptual construct in Buddhist theory is that of *upāya*, or skilful means. From a Buddhist perspective, skill is necessary

to cultivate because enlightenment is difficult to achieve and to facilitate, and because the Buddhist virtues—and this is true both of individual and social virtues—require not simply intention but success. It is not enough to form a desire, even a sincere desire, to be generous. Without the successful completion of generous acts, generosity is not realized. Even an act motivated by generosity, if it does not succeed in benefiting its target, fails, on a Buddhist analysis, to be a fully generous act. The road to hell, one might say, is paved with good intentions; the road to Buddhahood, with good realizations. This is not, of course, to say that such an act is thereby vicious, or bereft of moral worth, but only to recognize that complete virtue requires more than just good intention. (The parallels to Aristotle's argument for the need for practical wisdom in moral life are intriguing here. But a full comparison would take us far afield.) What goes for generosity goes as well, *mutatis mutandis*, for patience, wisdom, effort, concentration, compassion and the rest. The injunction to any virtue is always, in Buddhism, *ipso facto* an injunction to cultivate the *upāya* necessary for its realization.

Moral skill is necessary for the expression and development of Buddhist virtues and for the attainment of the good as seen from the Buddhist standpoint. But the other side of this coin is that such skills are therefore valued not for their own sake, but rather simply as *means* to goods that are antecedently regarded as valuable (and these, too, instrumentally valuable—because they conduce to enlightenment). And any skill or method that conduces to Buddhist virtues or goods is, simply in virtue of that fact, worthy of cultivation. This is not to say that other considerations might not weigh against the use of any particular means: Buddhism is resolutely multivariate and nonabsolute in its assessment of actions and institutions and admits an indefinite range of moral quality between the irredeemably wicked and the morally perfect, depending on the complex admixture of motives and consequences involved. The centrality of this category of instrumental good, however, allows for a distinctively Buddhist justification and interpretation of democracy.

The route to such a justification and interpretation should be clear: given the conception of the collective, social good to which we have seen Buddhism is committed, if it turns out that liberal democracy is the best means to achieve those goods, it follows straightforwardly from Buddhist principles and from the theory of *upāya* that liberal democracy is the preferred Buddhist social framework. Moreover, considerations of *upāya* would then determine the precise shape of those democratic institutions and the social ends toward which they are to be directed. From this standpoint the intuition with which I began this discussion reappears: that democratic theory could provide the institutional and procedural framework for a social order whose conception of the good is rooted in Buddhism as potentially vindicated through this mediating concept. The important question to ask, then, is this: Is liberal democracy plausibly construed as the best means for realizing the social goods Buddhism seeks? It is to this question I now turn.

THE EMPIRICAL ARGUMENT FROM EFFICACY

The argument at this point becomes empirical, if only in the broadest sense of that term. For if *upāya* is what counts, the question regarding whether Buddhism permits or even demands a liberal democratic political order boils down to the question, "Does liberal democracy represent the best method for maximizing happiness, for minimizing suffering, for realizing equity, for achieving nonviolence, and for cultivating virtues such as patience, generosity, wisdom, and commitment to others?" If it does, we are home free. If not, perhaps we should be seeking a different sociopolitical order.

If this is the question, the answer appears to be too easy. A quick glance around the world's nation-states reveals that on any reasonable index of social utility the world's liberal democracies lead their more totalitarian rivals. This is so whether we look at straightforward economic indicators such as median income, percentage of population living in poverty, equity or distribution, and the like, or welfare indicators such as access to medical care, housing, nutrition, or schooling, or softer indicators such as level of social unrest or satisfaction with government. There is no doubt that on hierarchizing of the world's nations on these parameters the liberal democracies rise to the top. Neither can doubt exist about the empirical evidence that liberal democracy tends to reduce suffering and engender happiness.

What about the violence/nonviolence dimension? Here is one striking fact: in the last two-hundred years, one democratic country has never waged war against another. Democracy, one might say, as Kant argued, is the best inoculation against war. At the level of personal violence, the story is more equivocal. There are indeed some notably violent democracies (such as the United States) and some notably peaceful autocracies (Singapore). But these exceptions aside, the trend still evidently favors democracies even at this level.

We have seen that the Buddhist conception of the social good also includes an account of the virtues to be encouraged, cultivated and supported by a social order. This is a harder desideratum with respect to which to make the requisite empirical claim. There may be good plausibility arguments on both sides, and there are no obvious data, whether rigorous or intuitive, to which to appeal. I can at least say that on this dimension liberal democracy is *no worse*, as far as I know, than its alternatives.

This brief empirical argument is hardly conclusive. It is at best a good motivator. I have not appealed to any hard data. Nor would the generalizations I defend based on these intuitive characterizations lack exceptions. Nonetheless, I feel confident in saying that empirical considerations at least favor the hypothesis that liberal democracy is most likely the best political means for achieving the kind of society that Buddhist moral theory recommends. I turn now to some more theoretical considerations to suggest that the central feature of liberal de-

mocracy, the articulation and protection of fundamental human rights, is the best way to promote a Buddhist conception of the good, and hence that such a framework is indicated from the standpoint of *upāya*.

THE ARGUMENT FOR THE IMPORTANCE OF RIGHTS AS A FACILITATOR

As we have seen, a straightforwardly empirical argument for liberal democracy as the best means to realize Buddhist social ideals is, while a bit tendentious, a good motivator. But in the absence of compelling empirical evidence either way, I turn to a more theoretical argument, asking whether there is good reason to believe that respect for the fundamental set of human rights and the correlative political institutions recognized in the liberal democratic tradition provides greater *promise* as a vehicle for the development of a society conforming to Buddhist ideals than do its competitors. The answer to this more forward-looking question, is more strongly positive.

Asking this question also gives us additional theoretical leverage. For by focusing on the more abstract connections between Buddhist and democratic ethics and politics, we can get some insight into the ways in which the two bodies of theory might mutually inform each other and into how a Buddhist democracy might actually look. That is, at the same time that we examine the degree to which these two systems are consistent or even axiologically complementary, we can determine the exact nature of that complementarity.

What are rights good for? From the standpoint of classical liberal theory, an important class of personal rights, which we might call "privacy rights," can be understood as constructing protective barriers against the intrusion of other individuals and state power into our private lives. Examples include rights to free speech and association, to freedom of religious expression, freedom against unwarranted search and seizure, and so on. First and foremost, these rights protect their bearers against gratuitous harms, whether inflicted by other individuals or by government, and, equally importance create a space—the private sphere—in which an individual or group can pursue and cultivate the good as they see it. Without a framework of such basic personal privacy rights, no one can be secure to pursue any particular vision of the good. Now, as I argued above, Buddhism is nothing if not a view about the good. It follows that if the protection of privacy rights is *ipso facto* a protection of the realization of such views, liberal democracy's commitment to such rights enables a Buddhist life, at least for individuals. But at this level of analysis, all that we are really saying is that the individual rights enshrined by liberal democracy provide protection for *any* set of values an individual might wish to pursue, and not that there is any special relationship between democracy and Buddhism. We can, however, go farther.

One important core value in Buddhist social morality is the minimization of the suffering of the disadvantaged. How can a social order best realize this value? One obvious answer is this: enshrine a fundamental civil right to a minimal standard of living and minimal access to such basic goods as medical care. Now, to be sure, these goods themselves can be provided by even the most totalitarian regime. But the only way to guarantee them effectively is to establish them as fundamental rights within a political order. And the institution of rights itself has its home only in the context of a liberal political order. The best way to realize this particular value, a core of the Buddhist conception of the good, is therefore to embed these specific rights in a liberal social order.

Similarly, we can ask what the best route is to the achievement of nonviolence in social institutions. I noted above that in general democracy is an excellent guarantee against the settling of major internal disputes through organized physical violence, such as civil war. That empirical argument counts of a lot. But violence comes in other, more implicit forms, such as institutional racism, oppression, coercive political and economic structures, and the like. Each of these forms necessarily rests on a foundation of either explicit or constantly threatened violence for its maintenance. Liberal democracy is of course the best way imaginable—both because of its universal enfranchisement and its respect for fundamental rights—to reduce and to eliminate the degree of violence present in a society. Many of the forms of institutional violence I have examined consist directly in the violation of recognized rights or the failure to recognize rights enshrined in liberal democratic institutions. Essential features of such political orders such as universal enfranchisement and the openness of political processes combine with principles generally acknowledged by citizens and enshrined in law concerning access to education and basic social welfare codes to dramatically reduce the level of such institutional violence in all liberal democratic societies, when this is compared with totalitarian neighbors.

Liberal democratic societies also cultivate a greater sense of mutual responsibility than do their totalitarian counterparts, simply because they offer their citizens a genuine voice and chance to participate in civic affairs. The sense of membership in a common venture this engenders cannot be underestimated, and the consequence is an increased commitment to the common good—after all, it is a good in which every citizen has a voice in determining.

Openness of government institutions has two other benefits that support Buddhist values: inasmuch as Buddhism is concerned first and foremost with soteriology and with the religious practices that support liberation, it has an interest in political regimes that permit the free exercise of religion and of course the privacy, and hence the protection of religious practice is a hallmark of liberal democratic theory and societies. But this openness also limits the possibilities for corruption and hence alleviates the suffering that corruption inevitably produces.

Now all of this is subject to innumerable objections to the contrary. There are many examples both of liberal democratic societies that fail to live up to these ideals or that fail despite living up to them to deliver all of the goods I have enumerated. And there are certainly plenty of examples of illiberal societies that do deliver at least some of these goods. I have not, though, and need not, to make the case for liberal democracy as *upāya*, to show that there is a clear line between liberal democratic societies and all others, with Buddhist goods realized in their entirety for all citizens on the one side and denied to all on the other. To claim that this is possible would be foolish. All that is necessary is to show that overall the social structures advanced by liberal democracy represent the best means to achieve the ends recommended by Buddhism. And this I have endeavored to do.

WHAT LIBERAL DEMOCRACY CAN OFFER TO BUDDHISM

Can Buddhism gain anything from attention to liberal democratic theory? I think so. It is a striking feature of Buddhist literature, as I noted previously, that despite the tremendous importance of the structure of a society and its institutions, including predominantly its political structures, in determining the conditions of human life and the possibilities for the attainment of both temporal and spiritual goods, there is very little—really nothing—in the Buddhist philosophical tradition by way of social or political theory. This must be regarded as a serious lacuna in a philosophical system that aims at characterizing the nature of suffering and of its elimination for a being who is ineliminably social.

On the other hand, as also noted, Buddhism demands of its practitioners the development of *upāya*, and this must include social and political *upāya*. If what I have said about the conceptual and empirical relationships between the Buddhist conception of the good and the deliverances of democracy is valid, liberal democratic theory might simply be the obvious body of theory with which to fill this gap. The Mahāyāna canon prides itself on its perpetual openness to new texts. Perhaps it is time to make space in canonical collections of such *mahapanditas* as Locke, Rousseau, Mill, Jefferson, Dewey, Rawls, and Habermas. And indeed in the democratization of the Tibetan exile government and in the discussions of Buddhist democratic institutions within that community, I see the beginnings of this process.

WHAT BUDDHISM CAN OFFER TO LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

But the benefits of intercultural fusion philosophy do not flow in one direction only. Liberal democratic theory and those formulating policy in liberal democratic societies can also benefit from an injection of Buddhist ideas. Again, attention to

the development of Buddhist democratic institutions in the Tibetan exile community can be instructive—and not only, I emphasize, to Buddhists or members of Buddhist societies, but to secular theorists and policymakers.

There is a curious tension at the base of liberal democracy. When I examine the strategies by means of which it is legitimated—and I have in mind those of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Rawls—there is an essential appeal to practical reason in the following sense: it is argued that for arbitrarily chosen citizens, described in abstraction from their particular fortunes within society, it is rational to choose liberal democracy precisely because it offers the best chance for achieving personal happiness, or at least the best chance for avoiding the worst suffering. This is, of course, captured with the greatest clarity in Rawls's account of the original position and of the deliberations of the parties.

On the other hand, while liberal democracy offers this prospect precisely because it promises a government and set of social institutions that will not obstruct individual efforts to realize the good, it is deliberately minimalist in its promise to provide particular social goods, leaving such decisions either to contingent political processes or to individual enterprise. The reason for this is straightforward: democratic theory is resolutely both individualistic and pluralistic. The individualistic side leads to an emphasis on a broad zone of privacy and little positive social intervention for good or ill into the lives of individuals. The pluralism leads to a hesitancy to propose any but the most general and formal social goods as the objects of state action for fear that any more determinate commitment to a particular vision of the good will run roughshod over the rights and aspirations of those who do not share that vision.

But given the logic of legitimation that underlies this political framework, any enhancement of the basic stock of goods delivered to its citizens by a liberal democratic society would be chosen by initial contracting parties, so long as those goods are not parochial in nature—so long as they benefit the society generally and, as Rawls puts it, benefit the least advantaged, and hence protect citizens' vital interest in not falling too far in terms of total utility. That is, not only would a basic minimum of primary social goods be demanded by any rational contracting parties, but any rational parties would insist that as much as possible be available to as many as possible, and that avoidable poverty be avoided.

At this point Buddhism has something to contribute to the framework. First, the Buddhist goal of eliminating suffering enjoins a strong social welfare policy. That is, it enjoins the provision of basic education, health care, and a decent minimum standard of living for all citizens. Contracting parties who take this injunction seriously—who recognize both the universality of susceptibility to suffering and the possibility of its remediation—would think only briefly before rejecting an unbridled free market, for instance, and would insist on liberal social welfare programs. This is already an enrichment of the minimal conception of the good in most liberal theory.

But we can go farther. On any plausible contractarian story of the legitimation of and limits of government power, the parties to the initial contract know the general facts about human nature, though they may not know their specific circumstances, preferences, or positions. Knowledge of these general facts enables them to imagine the likely effects of any social order they contemplate establishing. Now it is overwhelmingly plausible that the set of virtues endorsed by Buddhist moral theory—patience, wisdom, nonviolence, generosity, and so on—in fact, when broadly realized, yield happier, stabler societies. Social institutions can be designed to encourage, reward, and foster these values or to discourage them. Parties to a social contract cognizant of these facts can be expected to agree to institutions that foster rather than discourage them. Again, this represents a substantial enrichment over a more value-neutral liberal framework.

We would therefore expect to find in a Buddhist democracy not armies but social service corps; not private health insurance schemes but a strong social welfare and health care system, egalitarian access to education, and significant incentives to charitable work. Institutions like this would take primacy over incentives to competition, to the concentration of wealth, and to the development of power differentials. This substantive account of the good stands in contrast to an emphasis on economic growth and the encouragement of private gain. But none of this is in any way incompatible with the democratic ideals of equality before the law, of participation in a public discourse, of open office and of a broad range of personal freedoms. In fact it is, one would argue, central to enabling these freedoms to make a real difference in the quality of human life. There is also no reason to think that Buddhist moral theory is *unique* in its ability to contribute a positive conception of the good to liberal democracy. Other substantive value systems may do as well. I only argue that it *can* make a contribution, and one that liberal democratic theory is in a position to reciprocate.

I hence conclude that while Buddhist values have typically been overlooked as valid considerations in the legitimation and design of social institutions in democratic theory and practice, this is both unnecessary and unjustified. A democratic society that draws on these principles in its social order and institutions has a greater prospect for success, and providing its citizenry with good lives and in fact greater claim to moral legitimacy than one that is neutral with respect to these principles. Buddhist democracy is thus not only not oxymoronic but is better democracy even when judged on the terms that the liberal tradition itself chooses and better Buddhism when judged on the terms that Buddhism itself chooses for moral evaluation. I conclude that these systems are—far from being antithetical—complementary, and that each is more compelling when adjoined to the other.