

# Buddhism as an Ideology of Social Reform

## An Early Buddhist Perspective

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### 1 Introduction

Even though we can claim that the respective cultures of Buddhist countries have been created by Buddhism, we do not have the first hand accounts of how it transformed these cultures at the time Buddhism began to gain acceptance in those countries; these events happened too long ago. However, we are fortunate enough to witness Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and his followers making history—by having Buddhism as the ideological basis of a great social reform movement with far-reaching consequences. In this talk, I intend to speak on the ideological aspect of the movement, looking at it through the early Buddhist perspective.

At the very outset, I must admit that the man, the work, and the movement itself have become a field of research; accordingly many scholars have said and written much on his work. So what do I have to add to the research already done? I answer: I basically support Gombrich's view on Dr. Ambedkar, and this paper is to extend and, where necessary, correct it.

### 2 The Buddha was not a social reformer

... my interpretation puts me at odds with those who see the Buddha as a social reformer. ... his [i.e., the Buddha's] concern was to reform individuals and help them to leave society forever, not to reform the world ... Though it could well be argued that the Buddha made life in the world more worth living, that surely was an unintended consequence of his teaching. ... He never preached against social inequality, only declared its irrelevance to salvation. He neither tried to abolish the caste system nor to do away with slavery. (Gombrich 30)

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I could not agree more with, or could have said better than, what Gombrich says as cited above. Anyone who thoroughly has studied the Pali Canon would come to the same conclusion. However, I do have something to add.

I argue that the Buddha not only had no interest in reforming the world but also would he take advantage, if possible, of the weaknesses of his contemporary society for the higher end of salvation for beings. The evidence for my argument is a seemingly unfair difference of the requirements for the going forth (*pabbajjā*) of men and women.

Since the time of enlightenment, the Buddha had been admitting qualified people to the Order based on their own voluntary will until his own father, Suddhodhana, made a request that “in future no boy be admitted to the Order without the permission of his parents” (Gombrich 177). The Buddha granted the request and accordingly made a Vinaya rule, against the very acts that he himself had been hitherto performing (Vin I 82–83; Horner 4: 104). Here Gombrich notes: “In doing so, he in fact corrects himself for he decides that what he did to his own father, and what he has just repeated with his own son, should never again be inflicted on any parent.” (177).

However, I do not agree with Gombrich. If he is correct, we should wonder why the Buddha never insisted that married men should take their wives’ permission too, for, whereas a son going forth might break the hearts of non-consenting parents, a husband going forth might have ruined the life of his wife, especially in those times when women had to live in the house-holds of their in-laws with very few rights of their own. And this appears even more odd because the Buddha did insist that married women should take the permission of both the parents and the husbands to get ordained (Vin IV 335; Horner 3: 394). Should we say that the Buddha was unfairly biased against women who wish to enter the Order?

In my opinion, on the contrary, the Buddha believed, and never changed his belief, that every man and woman has the right to renounce the world for achieving nirvana, the highest good for all beings. This is why he started to admit qualified people to the Order based on their own voluntary will after his enlightenment. And there is evidence that he did not relent when he met public resistance similar to his own father’s before he met the latter again.

At the time the Buddha was at Rājagaha; he was yet to see his father for the first time after his enlightenment. At the time, many young gentlemen had renounced and were practising the Noble path under him. The public criticized the Buddha, claiming that the ascetic Gotama was working to make people childless, to produce widows, and to break families. And when the people saw monks, the former openly ridiculed the latter using the following verse:

*āgato kho mahāsamaṇo Magadhānaṃ Giribbajam  
sabbe Sañjaye netvāna, kaṃ su dāni nayissatīti.* (Vin I 43)

The great ascetic has come to Giribaja of the Magadha people  
After taking away all Sañjaya’s (followers), whom will now he take away?

If we try to read between the lines, we can see a real possibility that such a public attack might have been preceded by personal requests of the bereaved families, addressed to, and rejected by, the Buddha. If the Buddha rejected the personal requests to return the sons

to their families, he did not give in either when he had to face the public criticism. On the contrary, he taught his followers a verse to be used as the response to these public charges:

*nayanti ve mahāvīrā saddhammena tathāgatā  
dhammena nayamānānaṃ kā usuyyā vijānataṃ* (Vin I 43)

Indeed, the courageous Buddhas take away by Dhamma  
Which kind of jealousy could be there of those who know (the Buddhas) taking away by Dhamma?

Then why did he relent when his father's request came up? Because, I argue, he knew that he could no longer get away with it, that it would have been too dangerous for himself and for his Order to continue as before. Suddhodana was seemingly a man of power among the people of Sakyan race; if he did not harm the Buddha or his followers, it must be only because the Buddha was his own son, not because he had no power to do so. If another king or man of power were to lose his son, daughter, or wife because the latter gets admitted to the Order without the permission of the former, the former may end up as a bitter and highly dangerous enemy against the Buddha and the Order. If my interpretation is correct, it means that the Buddha would push the social limits of his times as much as possible to spread his teachings, but he never went far enough to clash with his contemporary society.

And my theory can also explain why the Buddha never bothered to have the wives' permission for the renunciation of their husbands. It was simply because he knew that the wives of would-be monks in his times, usually living in the households of their in-laws, were hardly positioned or powered to harm the Order. Buddhists may view this kind of behavior as representing the Buddha's genuine will to have beings liberated, but non-believers may be tempted to accuse him of abusing a weakness of the society.

### 3 The Buddha was neither for or against social reform

Suppose Gombrich and myself are correct in our claim that the Buddha was not a social reformer. Does that mean his followers should also follow in his footsteps? In other words, should we claim that being a Buddhist means being a social conformist, who accepts whatever is there in the society? Or, should we agree with Gombrich, who guesses that "were a Buddha alive today, he might do the same [as Dr. Ambedkar has done]." ( 31)?

My answer is: the Buddha would not care whether we wish to reform the society or maintain the status quo. He was ready to teach anyone of whatever the social status, of whatever the particular walk of life, but only with a clearly-defined objective, i.e., the full liberation from the circle of birth, for which he advocated definite means thus:

*sabbapāpassa akaraṇaṃ, kusalassa upasampadā  
sacittapariyodāpanaṃ, etaṃ Bhuddhāna sāsanaṃ.* (DN II 49)

Not to do any evil, but cultivate the good,  
To purify one's mind, this the Buddhas teach. (Walshe 219)

Having an objective beyond the inspiration of people in general, the Buddha is like an mature adult, and people are like children who the former has to teach. He cannot expect children to act like as adults, but as an adult, he also cannot see any real significance in, nor entertain real preferences over, the toys that children hold in great value. What he will do is: to adapt his teaching methodology to children and teach them how to play with their toys, but with a different purpose. While children aim to get maximum fun when they play with their toys, the adult's purpose in teaching them how to play is to develop their physical and mental faculties. If children do get great fun from their play, this would be only an effect unintended by the adult.

Therefore, in the context of social reformation too, the Buddha will see social reformers and conservatives as two opposite teams in the game of life. It does not matter which side one joins or roots for, as long as one maintains a gentleman's manners, i.e., the Buddhist moral principles..

I will attempt to demonstrate my view by looking at how the Buddha has taught in the *Siṅgālovāda sutta* in *Dīgha Nikāya* (DN III 190; Walshe 232) on one fundamental relationship of the society—the relationship of man and wife. I would like to show this relationship in the light of Buddhist perspective to prove my theory, but before doing so, it would be good if we ask and try to answer the question: why do people get married? *Encyclopedia Britannica* gives one good answer:

[People get married to perform] the many basic social and personal functions for which it provides structure, such as sexual gratification and regulation, division of labour between the sexes, economic production and consumption, and satisfaction of personal needs for affection, status, and companionship; perhaps its strongest function concerns procreation, the care of children and their education and socialization, and regulation of lines of descent. (*Britannica* "marriage")

Now let us see what the Buddha had to say on this matter:

<i>Husband's duties</i>	<i>Wife's duties</i>	
Honouring the wife	Properly organizing her work	
Not disparaging the wife	Being kind to the servants	
Being faithful to the wife	Being faithful to the husband	According
Giving authority to the wife	Protecting family property	
Providing adornments to the wife	Being skillful and diligent in her duties	

to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, what has the Buddha's teaching ignored?

**sex** The Buddha entirely ignored the sexual fulfillment, which may be the most significant factor in a happy marriage.

**children** He also said nothing about the creation and proper care of children, which may be the most important social function of marriage. He did speak on the mutual

duties of parents and children in the same *sutta* but the image of children is absent in the general picture of marriage. Did he mean that we should treat children properly if they arrive, but never mind if they do not?

**others** All other personal and social functions outlined in *Britannica* can be performed only when both parties in a marriage relationship perform their duties properly. And the Buddha did specify the mutual duties of two parties involved, so we may be tempted to think that the Buddha did deal with other essential functions of marriage. However, what should we do if one party is dutiful but the other is not? How should we manage to get our rights in such a situation? The Buddha did not say anything about it.

Now, should we exactly follow the Buddha and assert that we should ignore the factors of sex, making children and marital rights in a Buddhist marriage? It would have been absurd to do so; anyone ignoring these factors should be a monk or a nun, not get married. Then how should we understand the Buddha? We should not forget that the Buddha unequivocally denounced all kinds of sensual lives in *Dhammacakkappavattanasutta* (SN V 421; Bodhi II 1844). It means: if we cannot give up the mess of a married life, we must deal with it ourselves. What the Buddha taught concerning marriage is only to let us salvage something useful—cultivating some wholesome deeds and reducing unwholesome deeds—out of the mess. If we do achieve marital bliss by following his teachings, it is only a bonus not intended by him.

Now, we should note that a marriage, the relationship of a man and a woman sharing their lives, is the base of a family, the basic unit of the society throughout the history. Therefore we can say that marriage is (where it is common practice) the basic relationship of the society. If the Buddha did not bother about the rights in the most basic social relationship, why would he have cared about other kinds of social rights? If he supposed us to solve our own marital problems, why would he have bothered about other social problems? He could not bother less, I have got to say.

#### 4 Buddhism as a social ideology

Well, so the Buddha did not care if we reform the society or not. But suppose we will use his ideology to reform the society. Are we justified, as Buddhists, to do so? I answer that we can use Buddhism as our ideology whether we are reformers or conservatives. This is the conclusion I have drawn from the descriptions of Wheel-Turning Monarchs (*cakkavattirāja*), the ideal kings mentioned in various suttas.

An ordinary king becomes a Wheel-rolling Monarch with the appearance of the Wheel Treasure [*cakkaratana*]. ... Then the wondrous wheel rolls onwards towards the regions of the East, South, West and North, in that order, with the king and his fourfold army .... As soon as the king takes up his abode where the Wheel stops, all the regional kings come to him and request: “Come, O Mighty King! Welcome, O Mighty King! All is yours, O Mighty King! Do,

O Mighty King, be a teacher to us!": The Wheel-rolling Monarch fulfills this request earnestly by admonishing them to be ethically good. Then all the rival kings in the region become subject to the Wheel-rolling Monarch. (Oliver 62)

Now let us stop and think. Suppose such a miracle king appears in our modern times. Then, how many countries or governments will voluntarily choose to give up their sovereignty and live under such a king? I think there will be very few, if not none. People in general will have great respect for such a king, I do not doubt that, but it is a different thing to abandon national pride or prejudices. What I wish to point out is: if a Wheel-turning King is, as Gombrich says, "a mythical being" ( 84), the people volunteering to be his subjects are no less mythical. What I mean is: the society of a Wheel-rolling monarch is an ideal society which we can learn from, even if we cannot realize such a society in reality.

According to *Cakkavattisutta* (DN III 30; Walshe 813), when a Wheel-Turning Monarch has given up his throne, the Wheel-Treasure (*cakkaratana*), the symbol and source of his power, vanishes. At that time, if his successor feels that he has lost his right to the Wheel-Treasure and wishes to regain it, he can perform the duty of an Ariyan Wheel-Turning Monarch. If he succeeds in doing so, the Wheel-Treasure reappears, making the successor another Wheel-Turning Monarch.

Now what is the duty of an Ariyan Wheel-Turning Monarch? It is, in short: (1) to look after the royal subjects, human beings or animals, according to Dhamma and (2) to learn the Dhamma from forest-resident ascetics. The former can be performed only by a king; this is his privilege. If one is not a king but can be an ascetic living in a higher moral plane, one is entitled to get the homage of the king himself.

From that account, I conclude that, in an *ideal* society, the social hierarchy is defined by the different degrees of virtue and wisdom of the people, that is, the best and wisest wins the highest position. If downtrodden people wish to climb the social ladder, they must cultivate their moral virtue and wisdom; if the upper-class people wish to retain their exalted status, they should earn it, not by oppressing poor people, but by cultivating their own moral virtue and wisdom.

Now, suppose we follow the Buddha's way and cultivate our virtue and wisdom. Does it guarantee our success? No, because in the real world, success is defined by many factors; the right does not always win. *Satyam eva jayate* is an ideal, not a fact. However, if we call ourselves Buddhists, we should follow the Buddha's way; even if we may lose in this life, we win in terms of *saṃsāra*

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