

GOOD GOVERNANCE AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

By Ven. Dr. Thich Nhat Tu

Harmony, cohesion and integration are seen in Buddhism as great values for sustainable human development. The concept of society based on mutually social interest is best addressed by the Buddha in the *Discourse on the Advice to Sig Ola*.¹

There are several social principles which contribute to the strength of social order and harmony. Among those principles, seven foundations for social prosperity as given to Vajjian republic (*Vajj *-aparih Oniyadhamma*) are well known: (i) to hold regular and frequent assemblies, (ii) to meet together in harmony, disperse in harmony and carry out business in harmony, (iii) not authorise what has not been authorized but proceed according to what has been authorized but abide by the original principles, (iv) Honour, respect, revere and salute the elders, and consider them worthy of listening to, (v) Women and girls are not forced and abducted to live with men (vi) to honour, respect, revere and salute the religious shrines at home and abroad, and do not neglect those righteous ceremonies held before them, (vii) To provide proper protection and support for *Arahats*, so that such *Arahats* may come in future to live there while those already there may live in comfort.²

The first principle may be taken as ensuring the collective decision-making as it is an important factor in democratic political institution, when examining it from the way in which the king or ruler was elected. As we know in the Buddhist structure of kingship, king or ruler is the great elect (*mah Osammata*), who is elected by the rest of society on the grounds of his great personality and physical fitness, for the sake of maintaining social order, harmony and peace.³ The frequent meetings, thus, exercise the state's functions and duties in maintaining national security and economic progress. As a bilateral relationship between the public opinions and decision-makers, frequent meetings would improve welfare policy and development program, and therefore become necessary for social progress and development. Frequent meetings are important in government and civil body, as they provide provides chance to bringing members of an organization together, for understanding one another, learning form one another and helping one another, and thus strengthen the unity in community and society.

The second principle refers the manner in which the meetings should be conducted. That is intended to eliminate individualism in organization or society, and to nourish the spirit of concord, unity, and harmony in working, carrying on as well as breaking up business. This tends to put an end to a hostile and competitive attitude while encouraging co-operation, mutual help in order to arrive material and ethical progress for all members of an organization. While the first principle is emphatic on decision-making and the implementation of decisions on the basis of democratic constituent, the second helps strengthen the force of togetherness and unity for the progress and development of a community. In this institution, all opinions of members are equally respected and examined in order arriving at the

¹ D. III. 180-93.

² D. II. 73; A. IV. 15.

³ D. II. 84-88.

most appropriate policy for development as well as the most adequate solution for any problems, which may arise. Thus, mutual understanding, knowledge sharing, and opinion toleration will enrich, while conflicts of opinion and strategy, if any, would be solved harmoniously.

The third principle is seen to preserve and develop righteous customs and traditions and obeying the law, for the benefits of others, and society as a whole. What is important here is not customs, traditions and law, but rather the righteous ones. In other words, those customs, practices and traditions not in accordance with benefits, well being and happiness of society should not be authorized or followed, but should be banned. Only those good customs, practices, traditions and laws should be put into practice. The formulation of new law, if necessary, should also be considered thoroughly from its possible application as well as its values, so that it will not hurt the feelings of people, ensure no harm to their development. Law is thus seen as a necessary institution for enforcing justice, order and protecting social well being.

The fourth principle represents the cultural pattern of behaviour between two generations, the young and the elder, in the educational and intellectual manners. In recognising and respecting good traditional values from the older generation, the young get a chance to inherit the good, and develop themselves for the betterment. In this bilateral relationship, the young generation should pay respect to the elders and learn from them culture and wisdom to perfect themselves while the elder should give due attention, love and care to the young, guiding and educating them by their exemplary lives, in the righteous and ethical direction. This principle would narrow the generation gap, on the one hand, and contribute to the unity of conservative and radical groups on the other.

The fifth principle comes into existence to protect the weaker groups, as the fair sex is seen as physically weak and therefore usually is harassed by the strong sex. This principle provides conditions in which no women or young girl will be made to marry forcibly. Thus, the institution of arranged marriage is discouraged as it is seen against the freedom of choice of women. As a safeguard of women, this principle ensures women's rights as equal to those of men, in society. Exploitation, harassment, aggravation, and abuse by any means or force against women will, thus, be punished in order to protect women and girls from mistreatment, on the one hand, and to control social evils, on the other. In other words, it is the responsibility of the ruler to eliminate mistreatment of women, otherwise, it would lead to social and political decline.

The sixth principle is meant to protect religion, and encourage its social, ethical and fruitful activities, for the ethical and spiritual progress of the masses. Thus encouraging religious freedom is seen as an important means to preserve and maintain the moral fabric of the society. Taking consideration of religion from the educational, social and spiritual points of view, there would be no unnecessary conflicts between politics and religion, on the one hand, and the state will get proper assistance from religion to educate its people and prevent them from wrong doing. Thus safeguarding and promoting appropriate religious activities is seen as bringing about social progress.

The last principle is to welcome and value the holy man, who devotes his time

and energy for social good. Ensuring security for such morally perfect persons is therefore important for encouraging morality and spiritualism in the society. Their spiritual influence among the people will become a safeguard against social evils, the ending of which is the goal of the state. Thus preserving, respecting and welcoming the morally perfect ones is to keep and maintain moral order of the society.

Ensuring peaceful and harmonious society, these principles also help a community, a nation or a planet to protect itself from being swallowed up or overwhelmed by other communities, other nations or other planets.

As to how a monastic community is organized and maintained, the Buddha laid down seven principles similar in content to those followed by the republic Vajjian, namely, foundations for monastic harmony (*bhikkhu-aparih Oniyadhamma*):

(i) to hold regular and frequent meetings, (ii) to meet together in harmony, disperse in harmony and carry out business and duties of the *sangha* in harmony, (iii) do not alternate what has been prescribed, do not break up established rules, but train oneself in the prescribed training rules, (iv) to honor, respect, revere and salute the elders, the fathers and leaders of the *sangha* and consider them worthy of listening to, (v) not to fall under the influence of craving, (vi) to delight in forest retreat and (vii) to establish oneself in mindfulness wish this thought, 'let disciplined co-celibates who have not come, come hither, and let those that have already come live in comfort.'⁴

Here, the first four principles are the same as in the list of *Vajjian* principles, with minor changes: principles are substituted with moral training rules - *s *la* (as in iii), elders with fathers and leaders of *Saṅgha* (as in iv). The third and the fourth principles are seen as crucial conditions to maintain the unity, conformity, harmony and prosperity in the life and administration of the *saṅgha*. In the fifth principle, since craving is the motive force of unwholesome tendencies, evil deeds, and social conflicts, keeping oneself free from its influence is seen as an important step to lead a holy life. The seventh principle encourages a mindful life in harmony with fellow monks and this is the foundation of the holy life (*brahmacariya*), while the sixth principle is one of good environment for practice of mindfulness. These seven foundations are designed for bringing the unity, harmony and conformity in the *saṅgha* on the one hand, and also for making a holy *saṅgha* on the basis of mindfulness, on the other. Thus mindfulness is the most important factor in creating a community or society where all its members are striving for their freedom or liberation.

Other social principles for ensuring unity among community are known as four foundations of social harmony (*saṅgha-vatthu // saṅgraha-vastu*), namely: (i) generosity (P=S. *dāna*), kindly speech (*piya-vācā // priyavākya*), (iii) helpful action (*attha-cariyā // tathārthacariyā*) and (iv) equal participation (*samānattatā // samānāntatā*).⁵ Generosity is to spread loving kindness and compassion among the fellow beings, to strengthen the ties of friendship, to make life lovely, to support and protect those who are in economic hardship and crisis.

⁴ D. II. 77; A. IV. 20.

⁵ D. III. 152, 232; A. II. 32, 248; A. IV. 218, 363.

While generosity nourishes the material progress of individual and society, kindly speech, helpful action and equal participation are seen as three important qualities encouraging unity and harmony among community.

Avoiding evil and cultivating good are always seen as inter-twined. In the same manner, doing good for others is seen also for oneself and vice versa. How guarding oneself, does one guard others? By practice, by development, by training and by continuous exercise . . . And how guarding others, does one guard oneself? By proper resolve, by non-violence, by having a mind full of loving-kindness and by care.⁶

It is evident that Buddhism sees inter-being between the life of the individual and the life of society as compatible and inseparable. In other words, Buddhism sees social ethics in accordance with the theory of dependent origination (*paṭicca samuppāda*): on the arising of individual betterment and perfection arises the social good, and vice versa.

According to Buddhism, the principle of good governance leading to social harmony is based on mutually social interest or the welfare of oneself and others. The mutual interest and responsibility according to Buddhism starts from every member of the micro unit of the society, namely, family. If society is established on the total numbers of family, the status of the family, healthy or unhealthy, determines the status of the society. The mutual interest can be between parents and children, husband and wife, teacher and pupil, religious person and layman, master and servant or among friends.

NOTE

References to Pali Texts and their Commentaries are to the standard Pali Text Society editions, unless otherwise noted. In the case of the primary sources, the Roman and Arabic figures, following abbreviated titles, are the volumes and pages respectively of the editions published by the Pali Text Society.

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⁶ S. V. 169.