

# GOOD GOVERNANCE AND THE IDEAL SOCIETY

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According to Buddhist teachings, an ideal society does not necessarily mean that all its members are living the same means, striving for the same purposes and objectives, and reaching the same goals.<sup>1</sup> In Buddhism an ideal society is one in which equality, democracy and human rights are respected, moral and spiritual advancement is encouraged and people are interested in moral life. It is a society which provides aids to those needy, strengthens those who are weak, brings harmony to those who are in disharmony, brings happiness and light to those in suffering and darkness.

Everything the Buddha taught is for the pragmatic benefit to all living beings. His main concern is to remove human sickness of suffering, bringing loving-kindness, compassion, for oneself and others.<sup>2</sup> His teachings to people are for the purification of their thoughts, speech and actions, for destruction of suffering and sorrow, for overcoming of grief, for reaching the path and for the realization of *nirvāṇa*. He is therefore described as a person who appeared in this world for the welfare, benefit and happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good and interest both of gods and human beings.<sup>3</sup>

Following are some important characteristics of an ideal society as featured here and there in the teachings of the Buddha.

**A Moral Society.** The whole teachings of the Buddha can be best summarised in the following triple ethic: “avoidance of evils, cultivation of good and purification of the mind; this is the teachings of the Buddha(s).”<sup>4</sup> He encourages all members of society to observe the five ethical principles (*pañca-sīla*) or ten wholesome paths of action (*dasakusalakammamāgga*), and lead a life in accord with the noble eightfold path (*ariya-aṣṭāṅgika māgga*), in order to build a moral-based society. It is suggested that every citizen of this society should think and act what is good to himself and others, conducive to welfare, well being and happiness of the whole society and mankind.<sup>5</sup>

**A Rational Society.** It is said that the Buddha’s teaching is timeless (*akālika*), inviting one to come and see or try and test (*ehi-passika dhamma*), leading onward (*niyyānti*) and to be understood individually by the wise.<sup>6</sup> What the Buddha taught to his disciples now known as the *Tipiṭaka* // *Tripitaka*, is just a few practical and rational things which are profitable, benevolent, useful and relevant to human problems.<sup>7</sup> He encourages us to exercise our free will (*cetanā*), lead a life of rationality, in order to see things as they really are (*yathābhūta*).<sup>8</sup> Human value, will, effort, potentiality,

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<sup>1</sup> Advocating the principle of dependent origination (*paṭicca samuppāda*), the Buddha does not believe in the concept of absolute of any kinds.

<sup>2</sup> *S. I.* 89f; *A. III.* 39f.

<sup>3</sup> *M. I.* 21; *A. II.* 147.

<sup>4</sup> *Dhp.* 183; *D. II.* 49.

<sup>5</sup> *A. II.* 95, 179.

<sup>6</sup> *M. I.* 37.

<sup>7</sup> *S. V.* 438.

<sup>8</sup> *M. I.* 21.

responsibility and dignity lie fully in him.<sup>9</sup> One is advised to follow his teachings, only after a careful consideration on its nature and values, and seeing it conducive to well-being and happiness.<sup>10</sup>

**A Cultural Society.** Buddha's teachings, undoubtedly, are aimed at bringing about development or improvement (*bhavanā*) of human personality. Buddhism introduces a culture of body and mind (*bhāvanā ca bhāvanā*) which benefits the individual as well as the whole society to which he or she belongs.<sup>11</sup> By culture of body (*kāyabhāvanā*) is meant to restrain the sense organs (*indriyasaṅvara*) while by culture of mind (*cittabhāvanā*) is meant to cultivate the mind (*citta*) and its properties (*cetasika*), reaching a state of equanimity (*upekkhā*), where all disturbing emotions, pleasant (*sukhā vedanā*) and unpleasant (*dukkhā vedanā*), and emotional attachments are totally dropped.<sup>12</sup>

**A Just Society.** Social justice and social welfare are two features of ideal society of Buddhism. It is a society in which all activities including agriculture (*kaṣigorakkha*) and industry (*vānija*) should be just (*dhammika*) through the righteous means (*dhammena*).<sup>13</sup> All social groups such as parents, children, husband, wife, teacher, pupil, employer, employee, friend, companion, the householder and the religious, perform well their perspective duties.<sup>14</sup> Even the King or the ruler of the country also trains himself in righteousness with ten royal duties (*dasā rājadhama*),<sup>15</sup> for bringing about welfare, happiness and peace for his subjects and kingdom. Within this framework of a just society, every member leads a righteous livelihood (*sammāvajjivā*) with sincerity, honesty and devoid of all wrong means of living (*micchāvajjivā*).<sup>16</sup> Everyone earns a living or makes wealth by his own ability, effort and strength in a lawful and righteous way. In this context, the Buddha states that "righteousness is the best thing for people in this life and the next."<sup>17</sup>

**An Equal Society.** The Buddha advocates an egalitarian society, in which all men are ethically, spiritually and socially equal. He teaches the doctrine of equality between man and man. He establishes democratic administration in the *saṅgha*. He denounces castes, and values a person not from his birth, social status, race, colour, or sex, but rather in accord with his moral behaviour.<sup>18</sup> His *saṅgha* was the first of its kind in history of mankind admitting all members of four castes without any discrimination.<sup>19</sup>

**A Humanistic Society.** According to Buddhism, man is a combination of psychological and physical components (*nāmarūpa*) and not a product of the so-called 'creator of the universe.'<sup>20</sup> Man is the only creator (*nimmata*) and designer (*kattā*) of his own life and world, under the causal law of action (*kamma*). The Buddha establishes a society where human suffering is reduced to minimum or put to an end

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<sup>9</sup> A. III. 337f.

<sup>10</sup> A. I. 190ff.

<sup>11</sup> M. I. 240.

<sup>12</sup> M. III. 298ff.

<sup>13</sup> D. I. 135ff.

<sup>14</sup> D. III. 80-93.

<sup>15</sup> J. II. 367, 400; J. III. 273; J. V. 378.

<sup>16</sup> A. III. 111, 208; M. III. 75.

<sup>17</sup> D. III. 83.

<sup>18</sup> Sn. 612-20.

<sup>19</sup> Vin. II. 239; A. IV. 202.

<sup>20</sup> D. I. 18, M. I. 327.

(*anto dukkhassa*).<sup>21</sup> His teachings concern with loving kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), generosity (*dāna*) and justice (*dhamma*) among human beings.<sup>22</sup>

**An Altruistic Society.** The structure of Buddhist ideal society is based on ethical considerations, where all egoistic and selfish thinking, motivation and action are dropped out.<sup>23</sup> The society that the Buddha wishes to introduce is the society ‘for the good of many and welfare of many’ (*bahujanahitāyabahunasukhāya*) in conformity with the Buddhist principle of righteousness (*dhamma*). Buddhism aims at building a society without self-interest. The ideal Buddhist society is one in which there is no conflict between self-interest and the interest of the community. Here interest of the community should be given precedence to self-interest of individuals. It should be noted here that sacrificing of self-interest does not amount to the destruction of one’s autonomy.

**Harmonious Society.** For a harmonious and prosperous society, the Buddha lays down seven foundations (*Vajjāparihānīyadhamma*) for the lay community,<sup>24</sup> and another set of seven grounds for the *sāṅgha*.<sup>25</sup> He teaches that one should live with his fellow-beings, in a harmonious way, by avoiding disparagement of others while exalting oneself. On the other hand, he is advised to respect, honour and support those who live in confirmation with righteousness (*dhamma*).<sup>26</sup> Herein in whatsoever company all members dwell in harmony, courteous, without quarrels, like milk and water mixed, looking on one another with the eye of affection.<sup>27</sup>

**A Balanced Society.** The society which the Buddha favours is that which avoids two extreme (*ubho ante anupagamma*) ways of life.<sup>28</sup> One extreme is self-mortification (*attakilamathānuyoga*) usually practised by ascetics who wrongly believe that enduring physically intense pain leads to emancipation, while the other is excessive indulgence in sensuous pleasure (*kāma-sukhallikānuyoga*) commonly seen among the ordinary people who do not see higher forms of happiness, such as those of meditation levels. Every member of society should lead a life of the middle path (*majjhīmapāṭipadā*), consisting eight factors<sup>29</sup> in order to bring real well-being, happiness and freedom to himself and others. In such an ideal society, one is advised to lead a life of good health, endowed with a good digestion and of a middle kind suitable for striving,<sup>30</sup> and all kinds of moderation especially in consumption are encouraged, while all forms of extremism are to be avoided.<sup>31</sup>

This is a society in which all the citizens live with right livelihood and in high responsibilities while the rulers or administrators provide economic stability, standard

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<sup>21</sup> S. IV. 384: “Both formerly and now, O Anurādhā, I declare only suffering and its cessation.” *Pubbe cāham Anurādhā etarahi ca dukkhaṃ esseva pāpāpemi dukkhassa ca nirodhaṃ*.

<sup>22</sup> A. III. 39f; S. I. 89ff.

<sup>23</sup> M. I. 135.

<sup>24</sup> D. II. 73; A. IV. 15.

<sup>25</sup> D. II. 77; A. IV. 20.

<sup>26</sup> M. III. 37ff.

<sup>27</sup> A. I. 70. Cf. M. I. 398; M. III. 156; S. IV. 225; A. I. 70; A. III. 67.

<sup>28</sup> S. V. 421.

<sup>29</sup> These are (i) right view (*sammādiṭṭhi* // *samyagdṛṣṭi*), (ii) right thought (*sammāsaṅkappa* // *samyaksaṅkalpa*), (iii) right speech (*sammāvācā* // *samyagvāk*), (iv) right action (*sammākamanta* // *samyakkarmānta*), (v) right livelihood (*sammāājīvā* // *samyagājīva*), (vi) right efforts (*sammāvāpāyāma* // *samyagvyāyāma*), (vii) right mindfulness (*sammāsati* // *samyaksmṛti*), and (viii) right concentration (*sammādhī* // *samyaksamādhi*).

<sup>30</sup> M. II. 95.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. A. II. 249.

education, justice so that people will be confident, self-reliant, energetic, industrious, honest, moral, generous, tolerant. As to environment, people enjoy association with good company, have a balanced livelihood, maintain good relationship with others and contribute to the well being and happiness of society. Leaders and the masses should use skilful means for their happiness and happiness of others in creating a world void of greed, hatred and delusion.

## CONCLUSION

This article is devoted to an analysis of the Buddhist socialization in an ideal society, as result of good governance revealed in the Buddhist texts. As a social reformer in ethical sense, the Buddha rejected the Brahmanical caste-based system of society as a way of economic exploitation on the part of religious and political groups of society over the masses. Disconnected human social status from one's birth, the Buddha associated it with one's deliberately ethical actions (*kamma*). According to this theory, it is one's moral and spiritual development that makes him virtuous and worthy; and it is one's bad motivation and evil deeds that makes him an outcaste, not by his birth, family background, or social footing. The model of Buddhist ideal society is based on the principles of equality, righteousness and ethics. Social problems and evils are seen as being generated from craving (*taṅhā*) and unfavorable conditions of life. Crimes and punishments are therefore viewed from reformatory perspective, in order to arrive at effective solution, or at least to bring it under control. In addition, principles for social harmony and cohesion are given in this chapter to help build a society of self-disciplined, self-reliant people who are responsible for their personal well-being, progress and happiness as well as for those of others.

## 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. Exclusively, the abbreviated titles in the case of *Dhammapada*, *Suttanipāṭa*, *Itivuttaka*, *Udāna*, *Theragāthā* and *Therīgāthā* refer to the number of the verse.

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