



Towards A Buddhist Culture Of Non-Violence And Human Rights

Declaration

**The International Network
Of Engaged Buddhists
On Vesakh 2542 / 1998**

On 10 May 1998 Buddhists all over the world celebrate Visakha-puja (Vesakh). It is the most important day of observance for Buddhists, the day we commemorate the Lord Buddha's Birth, Awakening, and Parinibbana. On this day Buddhists remind themselves of their undertaking to follow Buddha's path towards Enlightenment. The International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) would like to take the opportunity of this holy day to invite everyone to work towards a culture and global implementation of Non-violence and Human Rights.

Buddhism and Human Rights

Notions of rights derive from ethical principles. There is a clear convergence between Buddhist ethics and modern discussions on human rights, particularly in the common focus on responsibility and indivisibility/interdependence. The non-dual understanding of Buddhism gives rise to an ethics of inter-responsibility, or Bodhicitta - what His Holiness the Dalai Lama calls Universal Responsibility. In the Theravada we speak of Samma-sankappa or Right Thought, which leads to Bodhi, the Awakened Mind. This principle is expressed in everyday terms by the teaching of loving-kindness, non-violence, compassion, and particular responsibilities. For monks and nuns these are set down in the rule or Vinaya; for lay people in the Sigalovada Sutta and for rulers in the Dasarajadhamma.

All human beings, according to Buddhism, are equal, and each has the potential to realize the truth by his or her own will and endeavour, and can help others to realize it. Buddhist concepts recognize the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all human beings. The teaching of the Buddha holds that all human beings are endowed with reason and conscience. It recommends a Universal spirit of brotherhood and sisterhood. Buddhist theory holds that the "three poisons" of hatred, greed and delusion are at the root of violence in the world, and that the solution is for us to see so deeply into these factors that we are no longer dominated by them.

In the early, organic, societies the Buddha was addressing, these specific responsibilities were assumed to be adequate guidelines for human behaviour, with no need to identify the corresponding rights. In modern, fragmented societies, however, where the fulfillment of responsibilities cannot be guaranteed by the immediate community, these guidelines or skillful means (upaya) have been supplemented by corresponding rights. These are specified and protected by States and International Organisations. In large part these bodies derive their legitimacy from their promotion and protection of human rights. A State which does not guarantee the enjoyment of human rights by its people loses its claim to legitimacy.

Buddhism is widely regarded as the most tolerant of all religious traditions. However, Buddhist countries like Sri Lanka, Burma, and Cambodia have seen some of the highest levels of religious and ethnic intolerance in the world, with Buddhists among the main perpetrators. In other places it is Buddhists who are persecuted by the State, which fears the influence of Buddhism on the people. In Burma, Tibet and Viêt Nam, for instance, thousands of Buddhists (especially monks and nuns) have been persecuted, with well-documented instances of torture and executions. In Tibet most of the country's monasteries have been demolished.

The depiction of rights as simply a Western invention fails to understand the relationship of rights to responsibilities and ethical norms. The central values of all societies are very much the same. All ethical systems encourage people to respect each other, and discourage killing, violence and so on. Rights are skillful means designed to assist the implementation of these ethics.

Human Rights discourse has moved on during the past 50 years and has expanded and enriched the somewhat individualistic principles set out in the 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights' which was adopted and proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 10 December 1948. The dialectic of universalism and cultural relativism, for instance, is an immensely creative process as well as a cause for countless conflicts. The work since 1982 on the rights of indigenous peoples - group rights - is another important development. The cultural, social and political development of a nation is a dynamic process. The orientation of the process should not only be based in our own roots and traditions, but must also be shaped by innovative new ideas. Cultural diversity is a factor that enriches the modern approach to human rights, rather than hindering the universal respect for and observance of human rights.

Buddhist Commitment to Human Rights

As H.H. the Dalai Lama stressed: "I truly believe that individuals can make a difference in society. Since periods of great change such as the present one come so rarely in human history, it is up to each of us to make the best use of our time to help create a happier world".

In this spirit:

1. we call on all Buddhists to look into themselves, their institutions and teachings, in order to renew Buddhism as a way of peace and non-violence, not only in individual, but also in collective practice and theory. Buddhists must adopt an active approach to reducing suffering. This can be done by working for the active implementation of peace and human rights, including economic, social and cultural rights. The activities

related to the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights offer an excellent opportunity to renew and expand our efforts in this field.

2. we request all Buddhists to show solidarity with those who are persecuted by their governments and to stand up for their human rights.
3. we urge all Governments, especially in Burma, Viêt Nam and the Peoples Republic of China, to stop immediately the severe human rights violations against Buddhists and others and to ensure that human rights become a reality in their countries.
4. we invite all Buddhist communities and organizations to include human rights education in their programs and to distribute information and educational materials.
5. we encourage Buddhist leaders to give importance to the human rights issues in their communities and countries.
6. we support the appeal of H.H. the Dalai Lama and other Nobel Peace Prize laureates, that the UN should declare the years 2000-2010 the "Decade for a Culture of Non-Violence".

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