



Selflessness: Toward a Buddhist Vision of Social Justice

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Abstract

The difficulty of developing a theoretical framework for Buddhism's engagement with contemporary social issues is rooted in the very nature of Buddhism as an ontological discourse aiming at individual salvation through inner transformation. It is my contention, however, that the concept of "selflessness" can become the basis of a Buddhist theory of social justice without endangering Buddhism's primary focus on individual salvation. In this article, I show how the key concept of selflessness can provide a viable ground for Buddhist social justice by comparing it with one of the most influential contemporary Western theories of social justice, that of the American philosopher John Rawls. Drawing on the *bodhisattva* ideal and the Buddhist concepts of "sickness" and "cure," I then demonstrate how selflessness can serve as a link that allows Buddhists to be socially engaged even while pursuing the goal of individual salvation.

Introduction

The religious goal of Buddhism is the attainment of inner peace through the experience of enlightenment; this is often described as liberation or *nirvāṇa*. The latter term, *nirvāṇa*, which was used more commonly by the earlier Theravāda Buddhists, is often translated as a state of being "extinguished" or "blown out." It refers to the elimination of various mental obstacles, often called "defilements," which are essentially derived from the three poisons of desire, hatred, and ignorance. Liberation, on the other hand, a term preferred by the later Mahāyāna Buddhists, has a slightly

broader perspective, as it refers not to the elimination of certain states of mind, but rather to the attainment of wisdom, which is interpreted as freedom both from the bondage of life and death, *saṃsāra*, as well as from social and historical bondage.

Because of its emphasis on individual salvation, Buddhism is often seen as a quietist religion that fails to consider societal problems. This is, of course, a gross exaggeration. Mahāyāna Buddhism's *bodhisattva* ideal, Pure Land doctrine, and Maitreyanism, which often appeared in China in times of political instability, both reach past the individual to relate Buddhist soteriology to society as a whole. Nevertheless, it is true that, even today, Buddhist thought rarely, if ever, addresses the topic of social justice in the modern sense, that is, in terms of such things as human rights, the fair distribution of resources, the impartial rule of law, and political freedom. As seen in Mahāyāna texts such as *The Teachings of Vimalakīrti (Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra)*, the oft-mentioned phrase, "When one's mind becomes purified, society will also be purified,"¹ tells us that Buddhism has a rather naive notion concerning social issues: the communal good can be realized through the promotion of individual morality.²

Of course, Buddhism is hardly alone in this regard. Almost all of the ancient philosophies and religions paid scant attention to issues of social justice in the modern sense. Even Catholicism, which has addressed social issues from early times, did not concern itself with questions of social justice or use the term in official documents until the latter part of the nineteenth century. Indeed, it is only from the eighteenth century that social justice emerged as an important issue in political thought and social philosophy in the West. The last three centuries have thus seen the maturation of such key concepts as citizenship, political equality, and the fair distribution of economic resources.

However, the process of modernization that drove the development of social philosophy in the West paradoxically retarded it in the East. Belatedly experiencing modernization as "Westernization" initiated by military and economic contact with Western colonial powers, Eastern intellectuals lost confidence in their native traditions, coming to see them as relics of the past without relevance to contemporary problems. As a result, indigenous philosophies and religions, such as Buddhism, were neglected in favor of the study of Western thought.

This process has only recently begun to reverse itself. As the East becomes increasingly aware of the value of its own cultural identity, a new strain of thought is emerging, interested not only in relating traditional to modern concerns, but also in reevaluating tradition in search of solutions to the problems of contemporary society. The so-called "Engaged Buddhism,"

which attempts to address such issues as the environment, gender inequality and poverty, is one of the more distinctive contemporary efforts in this area. But it is too diverse to be considered a single movement, and still too new to have developed a theoretical framework for Buddhism's engagement with contemporary social issues.

The difficulty of developing such a framework is rooted not only in decades of intellectual stagnation, but more fundamentally, in the very nature of Buddhism as an ontological discourse aiming at individual salvation through inner transformation. Of course, this problem is not peculiar to Buddhism; all religions must face the dilemma of balancing the demands of individual salvation and social engagement. For this reason, I would like to present some tentative suggestions on how the concept of "selflessness," a core doctrine of Buddhism, can be used to form the basis of a Buddhist theory of social justice without endangering Buddhism's primary focus on individual salvation. I will begin by demonstrating how selflessness can provide a viable ground for Buddhist social justice by comparing it with one of the most influential contemporary Western theories of social justice, that of the American philosopher John Rawls; in doing so I will suggest that Buddhism contains within itself the latent potential for a theory of social justice suitable to the needs of contemporary society. I will then demonstrate how the concept of selflessness can serve as a link that allows Buddhists to be socially engaged even while pursuing the goal of individual salvation.

Selflessness and Social Justice

Does Buddhism contain the latent potential for a theory of social justice suitable to the needs of contemporary society? It is interesting to consider this question in light of the work of the American philosopher John Rawls, in large part because his extremely influential book, *A Theory of Justice*, seems to represent the apex of everything that Buddhism is not. Though designed to achieve social justice, Rawls's theory is explicitly amoral, in that it assumes no particular moral inclination in the individual, and it is likewise unconcerned with deriving an overarching transcendental or religious authority to enforce its notion of the social good. Rather, it seeks to demonstrate how social justice can be built upon individual self-interest, and therefore focuses less on individual behavior and more on the social institutions regulating that behavior. In its explanatory power and persuasiveness, it is a triumph of Western rationality.

It is my belief, however, that Rawls's brand of rational social engineering offers Buddhism an important chance to clarify its own underdeveloped relationship to the question of social justice. But in order

to do this, we must first discuss Rawls's theory in somewhat more detail.

In general, Western theories of social justice begin with the intention to legitimize and ensure the individual's freedom to pursue his own interests. Such a notion of *homo economicus* is not merely a product of the economical and social theories that were derived from and support capitalist society, but also has deep roots in the Western tradition prior to capitalism. The individual and society that serve as the background for Rawls's theory of social justice represent the individual in the pursuit of self-interest, and the society that consists of such individuals. For Rawls, justice is not a virtue handed down to human beings *a priori*, but rather a general condition that is needed to maintain the society. According to Rawls, "although a society is a cooperative venture for mutual advantage, it is typically marked by a conflict as well as an identity of interests" (Rawls 1971, 126). Thus, in order to settle the conflicts that exist among members of a society, "principles are needed for choosing among the various social arrangements which determine this division of advantages and for underwriting an agreement on the proper distributive shares" (Rawls 1971, 126).

However, Rawls recognizes that the fairness of these principles depends on the fairness of the process by which these principles can be induced and agreed upon. In order to warrant the fairness of this process, Rawls postulates a so-called "original position" for those charged with inducing the principles, meaning that his ideal decision-makers are not constrained by "arbitrary contingencies or the relative balance of social forces" (Rawls 1971, 120). To ensure this lack of constraint, Rawls further posits what he calls "the veil of ignorance," meaning that his decision-makers have no knowledge of their own place in the society they are designing. They could be well—or poorly educated, talented or dull—equipped to compete, or possibly not. Rawls believes that this uncertainty as to their own competitive potential in the social arena would naturally lead his hypothetical decision-makers to arrive at disinterested rules of social justice that would protect the less competitive members of society and ensure a fair distribution of resources to all. To do so would be in their own self-interest. Because of the veil of ignorance, the strongest motive for fairness is the possibility that you could be anyone in the community.

In terms of its methodology, Rawls's theory of social justice is based on ethical constructivism: drawing on the Western philosophical tradition, particularly Kant, he develops a set of ethical assumptions while staying within the scope of a strict empiricism. Nevertheless, I believe that Rawls's work offers some intriguing hints as to how to construct a theoretical framework for a Buddhist theory of social justice. It is, of course, not that the Buddhist point of view agrees with Rawls's theory, but that the Western

philosopher's work offers us a provocative way to relate the timeless, ontological concerns of Buddhism to the phenomenal world of social interactions. That is to say, it helps clarify the relation in Buddhism between the focus on self-nature and personal enlightenment—an ontological concern—and the need to think about the daily behavior of the Buddhist practitioner in society—a phenomenal concern.

On first glance, the amoral rationalism on which Rawls bases his theory of social justice might seem like the farthest thing possible from Buddhism; but further thought shows some surprising connections. The Buddhist theory of selflessness, when considered in terms of the individual and his/her place in the community, really becomes something of great social power: an extended interpretation of selfhood. That is, in Buddhism, the individual self is redefined to include all other selves through the theory of mutual interpenetration. And this brings us to an interesting intersection with Rawls; for if the hypothetical “veil of ignorance” and the possibility that “I can be anybody in the community” is the starting point for his conception of fairness, Buddhism offers a startling parallel in the concept of selflessness—namely, the idea that “I am *everybody* in the community.”

It is my belief that the Buddhist theory of selflessness can thus serve as a launching point for a theory of a rational social justice as persuasive as the one that Rawls suggests. But for this to be achieved, Buddhism will have to learn how to move away from the traditional ontological discourse of the *sūtras* and classical Buddhist doctrines—focusing on self-transformation and the individual's search for personal enlightenment—and into the phenomenal discourse of the social realm—meaning politics, economics, and law. In that sense, the theory of selflessness, the idea that I am everyone in the community, can become a theoretical doorway through which the Buddhist thinker passes from the ontological to the phenomenal realm of discourse.

Of course, the differences between Rawls's model of social justice and whatever Buddhist model is eventually developed will be significant. Almost certainly, the Buddhist model will put less emphasis on social institutions and more on personal behavior, most especially on such personal qualities as compassion and benevolence—qualities that are seen as contributing to the search for enlightenment. Indeed, this fact points to a final, inevitable divergence between Rawls's brand of rationalistic social engineering and Buddhism. For Rawls, the achievement of social justice is an end in itself, and his philosophical concerns stop there. Once social justice has been achieved, there is nothing more to talk about. Obviously, this cannot be the case for Buddhism, focused as it is on the ultimate concern of personal enlightenment. For Buddhism, the concern with social justice

must ultimately lead back to the search for enlightenment. The theory of selflessness may serve as a theoretical doorway from the ontological discourse to the phenomenal, but it must work as both entrance and exit. Involvement with the phenomenal realm of social justice must lead Buddhism back to the ontological discourse and the search for enlightenment.

The Selflessness of the *Bodhisattva*: Curing Oneself By Curing Others

As mentioned earlier, I believe that the concept of selflessness can be used to link the apparently conflicting goals of social justice and individual enlightenment. But to show how, we will have to take a step back and discuss the Buddhist ideas of suffering, the cure of suffering, and the *bodhisattva* ideal; only then will it become clear how social justice and the search for individual enlightenment can actually serve to reinforce one another.

In Buddhism, the process of spiritual growth is often compared to the healing of sickness. The First Noble Truth states that “life is suffering,” but in Buddhism’s view, suffering can be cured if the proper remedy is applied. Suffering stems from our subconscious desires, which are often referred to as “thirst,” thus indicating their blind and vehement driving force. Because of the blind nature of desire in general, this “thirst,” which causes the root sickness of human suffering, is often equated with ignorance. All other diseases are merely symptoms of this fundamental ignorance. The main symptom is the attachment to external objects and to something inside oneself, one’s so-called self.

Based on this diagnosis, the Buddha suggested the availability of a remedy. He believed that enlightenment, or happiness as opposed to suffering, is inherent in the individual, which means that happiness may be achieved by curing the root sickness within ourselves.

As stated at the outset of this paper, Buddhism’s emphasis on self-healing—the search for enlightenment—is the primary reason why it did not develop a mature social philosophy. And yet, though the Buddha never intended to create a political ideology, he certainly never ignored other people. Having taught his disciples and helped them become enlightened, he then urged them to preach to others: “Walk, monks, on tour for the blessing of many people, for the happiness of many people out of compassion for the world, for the welfare, the blessing, the happiness of *devas* and human beings. Let not two of you go by the same way.”³

Early Buddhists understood this passage to mean that the Buddha asked his disciples to work for others, but it was also interpreted as meaning that in order to help others one must first become enlightened and therefore

healed—a point made explicitly in a Buddhist dictum: “[O]ne who is sick cannot cure others.” As a result, Buddhists, occupied with the work of self-healing, became relatively passive in the social arena.

Yet, as stated earlier, it would be a gross oversimplification to claim that Buddhism is oblivious to the interpersonal dimension of human experience. The original belief that one who is sick cannot cure others came to be radically transformed by the *bodhisattva* ideal, which appeared in the later phase of Buddhism known as Mahāyāna Buddhism. This new religious figure, the *bodhisattva*, embodied the new socio-religious atmosphere at the time when Mahāyāna Buddhism began to appear in India.

Who Cures?

A *bodhisattva*, by definition, is a Buddha candidate who is often referred to in early Buddhist texts as representing the previous lives of the Buddha. In his many rebirths, the *bodhisattva* appeared in various kinds of existences, as an animal or a human being, and as a noble or commoner. The exemplary life stories of the *bodhisattvas* are compiled in the *Jātaka*. Mahāyāna Buddhists, however, feel that the stories of the previous lives of the Buddha are not merely a record of the past, but are, rather, exemplary patterns to follow in the present. Those who emulate the heroic acts of the Buddha in his past lives can also become *bodhisattvas*.

For our purposes here, the crucial importance of the *bodhisattva* ideal in Mahāyāna Buddhism is that the *bodhisattva* cures himself by curing others. We find the following passage in the *Vajradhvaja-sūtra*:

A Bodhisattva resolves: I take upon myself the burden of all suffering, I am resolved to do so, I will endure it ... And why? At all costs I must bear the burdens of all beings ... The whole world of living beings I must rescue, from the terrors of birth, of old age, of sickness, of death and rebirth. (Conze et. al. trans. 1964, 131)

This is not simply compassion toward others in need. For the *bodhisattva*, the essence of the non-self doctrine, which has been repeatedly emphasized since the beginning of Buddhism, is that there is in fact no difference between himself and others. “Non-self” in Buddhism is not merely the denial of a substantial “self,” comparable to the “soul” in the Western tradition; it also implies a nondualistic view of “me” and “others,” and asserts the extension of one’s own existence beyond the boundary of the self, to encompass that of others. Others, for the *bodhisattva*, are nothing more than the extension of his own existence. He embraces all others as “we,” which includes not just “me” and “you,” but also “them.”

The concept of selflessness thus opens the avenue to social awareness and the necessity of engagement. Vimalakīrti, a typical Mahāyāna

bodhisattva figure, identifies the sickness of all living beings with his own, stating, “I am sick because all sentient beings are sick; when the sicknesses of all sentient beings have been cured, mine also will be cured.”⁴ For this reason, he postpones his own enlightenment and chooses to be born again and again until everyone else attains salvation. The spiritual value of this choice lies in its active involvement in society and in the notion that society is an extension of one’s own existence. Indeed, Vimalakīrti instructs *bodhisattvas* to convert the experience of sickness into something positive, something that generates wholesome, striving energy:

Because of his own illness, he should take pity on all others who are sick. He should know of the suffering of countless aeons of past lives, and because of this he should think of the welfare of all beings. He should be mindful of the pure life. Instead of generating grief and vexation, he should constantly give rise to striving energy. He should become a king of healing and cure all ill.⁵

Here we see that the experience of suffering becomes transformed into the potentiality of curing others: without the experience of sickness one cannot cure another. At this point Raoul Birnbaum brilliantly states:

[F]or the Bodhisattvas, ... experience of illness will not be a hampering factor but rather a catalyst, the ultimate function of which is to stimulate renewed and increased dedication to spiritual work. Instead of causing the Bodhisattva to seek release from his own bodily pains by entering into the bliss of *nirvana*, illness for him should be a great leveler, reminding him of the essential brotherhood of man inherent in the shared suffering of disease. Conscious of his link to all beings, he should increase his resolve to come to their aid and succor. (Birnbaum 1979, 14)

Indeed, it seems as if the true *bodhisattva* actually welcomes or seeks the experience of sickness. Thus we read in the *Vajradhvaja-sūtra*:

To the limit of my endurance I will experience in all the states of woe, found in any world system, all the abodes of suffering ... I am resolved to abide in each single state of woe for numberless aeons; and so I will help all beings to freedom, in all the states of woe that may be found. (Conze et al. trans. 1964, 131)

Why does the *bodhisattva* choose to adopt the suffering of others? How does this enable him to help them and thus to lead them, and ultimately himself as well, to enlightenment? It is because only by fully embracing the experience of others, which naturally entails experiencing their sickness and suffering, can he fully realize himself as identical to them. The experience of absorbing himself into their sickness, and of thus realizing his essential identification with them, is the only means by which the

bodhisattva may develop wisdom and compassion, qualities that he needs in order to show others the cause of their sickness. Similarly, he may use these same qualities of wisdom and compassion in order to discover why he himself also suffers.

Obviously, the above discussion is anchored on the level of soteriology, not social philosophy. The *bodhisattva* seeks to cure himself of suffering by gaining enlightenment, but because of his profound understanding of the doctrine of selflessness, he realizes that to do so he must first help cure all other sentient beings. This then entails an active engagement with *their* suffering, and furthermore, a willingness to find personal inspiration in the struggle against suffering in general.

Yet though the concern here is undoubtedly soteriological, the basis of a nascent theory of social justice is also clearly evident. All that we need do is move from the ontological or soteriological level down to the phenomenal or social level. Once we manage this move, the doctrine of selflessness provides the underpinnings we need, in that it posits the mutual interdependency of all members of society and the shared nature of all types of suffering: spiritual, physical, emotional, and economic. To put it another way: just as Rawls's theoretical founders, in order to assure the fairness of their laws, are forced to imagine themselves as being potentially *anyone* in society, the doctrine of selflessness requires that Buddhists view themselves as being in fact *everyone* in society. The social implications of this viewpoint are of course powerful: *her* poverty becomes *my* poverty; *his* tragedy, *my* tragedy. And when combined with the model of active engagement offered by the *bodhisattva* ideal, in which personal health is achieved by helping others, we suddenly find ourselves with a solid rationale for social action.

What would a detailed theory of Buddhist social justice consist of? What would a just society look like from the Buddhist point of view? These are obviously extremely complex questions, far beyond the scope of this article. My goal here has been to show that these questions can be asked from a Buddhist point of view—indeed, that they urgently need to be posed—and that an attempt at an answer, however tentative, is in fact long overdue.

Notes

1. T 475 *Wei mo ch'i so shuo ching*, 538c. In my translation, I rendered the term “*fo t'u*” (*buddhakṣetra*), or buddha-field, as “society,” which, I believe, does not deviate much from the original meaning, and gives a better sense of the original word in the context of this discussion.

2. We might call this “perfectionism,” and Confucius’s notion of justice also belongs to this category. A perfectionist notion of justice has the potential danger of restricting personal freedoms and justifying social hierarchy. It seems to me that perfectionism is one of the characteristics of the classical notion of justice, both in the East and West. Agreeing with Plato, Brahmanical India viewed the purpose of the caste system as the realization of proper social justice. One extreme case of the perfectionist notion of social justice can be seen in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, a classic of Brahmanical India. In the midst of battle, Arjuna agonizes over whether he must kill his brother, even though it is for the sake of justice; the incarnation of Krishna (Kṛṣṇ.a) tells him that his duty as a member of the Kshatriya (Kṣatriya) caste should come before individual ethics. It would be worthwhile to note that the Sanskrit word “*Dharma*” means both “justice as righteousness” and “duty.”
3. I. B. Horner, trans., *The Book of the Discipline*, vol. IV, 28 (with slight modifications).
4. T 475 *Wei mo ch’i so shuo ching*, 544b.
5. T 475 *Wei mo ch’i so shuo ching*, 544c.

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