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## Can Buddhism Inform the Contemporary Western Liberal Debate on the Distribution of Wealth?

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# Can Buddhism Inform the Contemporary Western Liberal Debate on the Distribution of Wealth?

Caroline Mosler<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The contemporary Western liberal debate on the distribution of wealth revolves around whether the right to property may be subordinated to the good of society. Both Liberal Egalitarians and Libertarians make various negative assumptions concerning individuals, rights and duties. Buddhism, on the other hand, can offer the debate, and thereby the topic of human rights, a different perspective on the role of rights and duties and can introduce to the debate the issue of social, economic and cultural rights (“socio-economic rights”), as laid out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) or the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).

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### The Western Debate Over the Distribution of Wealth

The main opponents in the contemporary Western debate over the distribution of wealth are the Liberal Egalitarians, who argue that inequalities should be rectified by the state, and Libertarians, who argue that the state should not interfere with individual property. Their debate turns on three central concepts: justice, equality, and liberty.

#### *Justice*

Oxford Professor in Political Theory David Miller defines justice as “the constant and perpetual will (of the state) to render to each citizen his due” (76). It is key to political philosophy because it is considered “central to the justification of political authority” (74). The debate over the distribution of wealth is concerned with justice within a political society and the relationship between the state and its citizens, which requires the equal distribution of some social benefit (87).

Liberal Egalitarians and Libertarians can agree on this concept but vary in their interpretations of “what is due to each citizen.” What is due to a citizen, as Oxford political philosopher Adam Swift has argued, is directly linked to the concept of duty, meaning moral obligations towards between citizens to be realized through political and social institutions (11). The debate, therefore, focuses on the *rights* of citizens to be protected and implemented by the state, and at the same time on the *duties* of individuals towards each other.

Both Liberal Egalitarians and Libertarians consider a state “just” if it grants equal rights to individuals. John Rawls, a Liberal Egalitarian, outlines his first principle for just “social institutions” as: “Each person having an equal claim to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic rights and liberties” (*Political* 5). Robert Nozick, a Libertarian, claims that “individuals have rights ... which are so far reaching that they raise the ques-

tion what the state may do” (ix). Swift adds that the central concern of the primacy of rights is “individualism” or “the wellbeing of the individual” (139-140).

Both sides of the debate also largely agree on *what* rights citizens should have. Rawls, for example, embraces a basic set of rights and liberties such as the right to property, liberty of conscience and freedom of association, on the basis of the capacity to fulfill citizen’s “highest-order interests.” These interests are “to realize and to exercise ... (i) the capacity to honor fair terms of cooperation and (ii) the capacity to decide upon, revise, and rationally pursue a conception of the good” (“Papers” 365). On the right to property Rawls remarks, that every person has the right to exclusively hold property in order to assure a sufficient material basis important for self respect and a sense of independence (“Basic” 12). Nozick similarly embraces “rights of self-ownership,” which include the right to property, life and liberty (ix). Although neither Rawls nor Nozick make explicit use of the word “human rights,” their lists of rights imply civil-political human rights as all of the rights mentioned by them are to be found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) or the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

The disagreement between the two sides obviously revolves around the right to property and possible limitations to this right. It is noteworthy that this right is accorded a special place by the contributors in the debate. Wealth, as Swift says, is assumed necessary to achieve the liberal aim, namely that people be free to choose for themselves how to live their lives. (140).

Theorists on the Liberal Egalitarian side of the debate—Rawls, Dworkin or Phillippe Van Parijs, for example—argue that because of inequalities in talents or social and economic circumstances within society, it is necessary for the state to create policies such as taxation which may interfere with a right to property. It is the state’s duty to ensure

equal capability to enjoy and make use of rights. Libertarians such as Nozick or Friedrich Hayek, on the other hand, argue for a “complete priority of property rights” (Sen, *Development* 65). The state’s interference with someone’s wealth through coercive taxation is never justified for the reason that “rights preclude using some person as means to fulfill the needs or interests of others” (Gewirth 4). Both sides of the debate have developed “theories of justice” that defend their arguments.

Rawls, in his *A Theory of Justice*, developed the idea of a social contract, i.e., an agreement entered into by people during a state of ignorance regarding their social positions and other characteristics they represent (15). The contract specifies “fair terms of social cooperation” translated into two principles that specify duties of individuals towards each other coordinated through “social institutions” which every citizen can and should reasonably accept, provided that everyone else likewise accepts them (6).

Rawls’s first principle, outlined above as “equal rights for all” is subject to the second one, that of fair equality of opportunity and the “difference principle.” He writes,

Social and economic inequalities are to satisfy two conditions; first, they are to be attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity; and second, they are to be to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society. (*Justice* 42-43)

This second principle means that inequalities are allowed in what Rawls calls “primary goods,” which include income and wealth. They are even *desirable* to the extent that such inequalities are “to the benefit” of the “worst off” members of society (*Theory* 64-82). In practical terms, Rawls argues for a redistribution of wealth, making the right to property subject to the second principle. He argues,

(The task of the distribution branch of government) is to preserve ... justice in distributive shares by means of taxation and adjustments in the rights of property ... which encourages the wide dispersal of property as a necessary condition ... if the fair value of the equal liberties is to be maintained. (*Theory* 277)

Rawls explains that such redistribution of wealth is not in conflict with any rights and liberties because “the basic structure is arranged so that when everyone follows the publicly recognized rules of cooperation, and honors the rules the claims specify, the particular distribution of goods that result are acceptable as just (or at least not unjust) whatever these distributions turn out to be” (*Justice* 51).

Robert Nozick, a Libertarian, bases his theory of “Justice as Entitlement” on a morality of the “separateness of the person” (Swift 31) and the primacy of the right to self-ownership. He thinks that among the things over which an individual has an absolute right is his or her property (Wolff 18). Harvard political philosopher Michael Sandel also defines such right to control one’s property as a right not to be interfered with doing whatever we want to do with legitimate property (60). According to this, a person also has the right to give anything away (Nozick 168). A property right is legitimate, according to Nozick, if acquired through “initial acquisition, voluntary transfer or rectification” (Swift 32).

Nozick admits that inequalities in wealth distribution may be unjust if they have not been acquired legitimately. On the other hand, if inequalities in wealth rest on legitimate property rights, these inequalities are acceptable and no one should be coerced to redistribute wealth (Swift 34). It is the duty of every individual to respect property rights. The role of the state thereby only is to enforce contracts and to protect citizens against force, theft and fraud (Nozick 26).

### *Equality*

At the heart of the debate on the distribution of wealth lie the concepts of equality and liberty (or “freedom”), used as justificatory basis for the various conceptions of justice. It is often argued that the virtues of liberty and equality work against each other and that therefore any person who particularly values liberty cannot ever agree with an egalitarian project and vice versa (Barker 39). But, like “justice,” these concepts are interpreted differently by Libertarians and Liberal Egalitarians.

Both views define equality as the principle that all members of a political community will be treated equally with equal rights and liberties, meaning that the state regards no one’s conception of the good life as less worthy than another’s (Swift 93-94). Disagreement rises as to what conditions of distribution of wealth are necessary to allow individuals to enjoy such equality. However, equality is never considered a *distributive* ideal; i.e., it is never argued that everyone should have the same amount of wealth (Swift 44).

On the Liberal Egalitarian side, Dworkin has developed the notion of “equal concern and respect,” which says that “Government must treat those whom it governs with concern, that is, as human beings who are capable of suffering and frustration, and with respect, as human beings who are capable of forming and acting on intelligent conceptions on how their live should be lived” (Donnelly 44). This notion arguably could also be endorsed by Libertarians. Their idea of equality is based on the Kantian notion of not “treating people as a means to an end.” Coercive redistribution of wealth, e.g., through taxation, would be using some people for the benefit of others. As such, to Libertarians generally, the concept of giving each his due can be translated into equal respect for each person and her property and equal concern in protecting the right not to be interfered with one’s property (Sandel 67).

Returning to Dworkin, one of the policy implications of the principle of “equal respect and concern” is a “hypothetical insurance scheme” developed through his “envy test.” This test says: “equality is present when no member of the community envies the total set of resources under the control of any other member” (“Foundations” 223). The word “resources” can be substituted with “opportunities.” The opportunity a person has in life is directly linked to her economic, social and physical circumstances. Individuals are not provided with an initial equal bucket of opportunities because of the inequalities in these circumstances in society. Thus, Dworkin demands “equal concern and respect” by the state for each person and his or her particular circumstances through the compensation of any initial inequality or “brute (bad) luck” that limits an individual’s opportunities in life (*Matter*190-195).

Many Liberal Egalitarian theories also include various conceptions of “equality of opportunity.” A “minimal” equality of opportunity, for example, holds that a person’s particular characteristics such as race and gender should not be able to affect education and employment prospects (Swift 99). The more advanced conception of equality of opportunity, endorsed by Rawls, for instance, argues that everyone should have equal starting points from childhood, provided through free education, healthcare, etc. (Swift 105). Libertarians can probably agree with the minimal conception, as it does not necessarily require any redistribution of wealth, whereas the “more advanced” one does.

Harvard Economist Amartya Sen bases his Liberal Egalitarian notion of “basic capabilities equality” on the idea that everyone should be able to do certain basic things such as to meet their nutritional requirements and clothe and shelter themselves (“Equality” 218). Sen considers it not only to be important that individuals have the goods to satisfy basic human needs but also considers the “relationship between persons and goods” (“Equality” 216). Sen envisions a welfare state in which indi-

viduals are not working solely for their own self-interest (Klamer 135-150).

Another conception of equality is Phillippe Van Parijs's "equal basic income." He believes that for equal concern and respect to be realizable in society, every person "irrespective of her work or willingness to work and of any other circumstances should have a minimum of purchasing power in order to allow maximal individual freedom to live as one might like to live" (*Real Freedom* 30). This involves cash grants and, therefore, redistribution of wealth. Van Parijs would be a starting point for discussing the notion of "justice as desert," i.e., "giving people what they deserve" rather than what is due to them (Swift 39).

However, related to justice as desert, Dworkin considers "personal responsibility" important. He argues that "distributive justice consists of making people's shares of resources sensitive to their own choices but insensitive to their own circumstances" (*Matter* 311). To Dworkin, inequalities of wealth are acceptable as long as those stem from a person's choice to work harder than others or to take risks, having had the same initial circumstances to make such choices. He argues: "The principle that people must be treated as equals provides no good reason for redistribution in these circumstances...(but) provides a good reason against it" (*Matter* 206). Libertarians should agree with Dworkin on that point. The difference between the two sides lies mainly in "equality of opportunity," something that Libertarians do not embrace as such.

### *Liberty*

Liberal Egalitarians and Libertarians differ greatly on their conceptions of liberty. The Libertarian believes in "formal freedom" (Swift 55), meaning that one is free without any interference to activities by somebody else (Berlin 3). As outlined above, because of the high priority accorded

to property rights, the Libertarian believes that the state may not interfere with such property through coercive taxation and that people should be free to give charitably. Of course, in the enjoyment of her rights the individual is limited by the duty to respect the rights of others and it is the state's role to step in if an individual does not fulfill this duty (Nozick 29).

On the other hand, Liberal Egalitarians endorse “effective freedom,” which means that one has the ability to act in a certain way (Swift 55). Van Parijs, for example, challenges Libertarians' conception of formal freedom with his theory of “real-freedom-for-all” and his notion of a “highest sustainable basic income” as mentioned above. His theory is based on the idea that for a society to be just, citizens need not only “formal freedom”—absence of interference—but also “real freedom”—the power of capacity to act (Swift 55). Van Parijs argues,

A society whose members are free ... (has) a well-enforced structure of property rights ... in which opportunities—access to the means for doing what one might want to do—are distributed in maximum fashion ... Institutions must ... offer the greatest possible ... opportunities to those with least opportunities, subject to everyone's formal freedom being respected. (*Real Freedom* 5)

Van Parijs's theory shows similarities with Sen's idea of “poverty as capability deprivation” (*Development* 85). Sen argues that poverty does not only signify low income but rather a deprivation of basic capabilities (85). Libertarians partially agree. The Libertarian Friedrich Hayek argues that a certain level of economic security is necessary to achieve freedom. He writes, “Security against severe physical privation, the certainty of a given minimum sustenance for all can be achieved and is a legitimate object for desire” (124). Otherwise, Libertarians and Liberal Egalitarians limit their discussion on poverty. Berlin, for example, argues that the

incapacity to attain a goal is not a lack of political freedom, for whatever reason that may be, even for poverty. He writes, "Everything is what it is: liberty is liberty, not equality or human happiness" (5).

### **Buddhism on Morality, Politicians and Spiritual Well-being**

The debate about the distribution of wealth is based on the primacy of human rights, which in turn must inform social institutions that form policies regarding the distribution of wealth. In contrast, Buddhism takes moral codes for individuals rather than rights as foundations for what is moral. Of course, in general, rights are also moral codes, as Swift indicates: "Liberalism is itself a moral doctrine with the idea that people have moral claims against one another through which one individual can pursue her interest only to the extent compatible with the moral requirement that she treats others justly" (139). But Buddhist morality counsels the individual on the "good" way of life, whereas the debate's right-based morality is aimed at the opposite, namely that everyone should be able to choose the way they want to live as long as they are respecting others (Swift 140). It is through this difference that Buddhism can inform the Western debate.

For example, as Sen notes, in the Western debate a purely "institutional view of justice" is adopted; in doing so, it puts no expectations on the individuals that make up these institutions (*Idea* 85). Cho observes that the debate is also amoral as it seeks to build social justice on rights and self-interest of individuals, who are assumed to not have any moral inclination (78). Therefore, it is seen unnecessary, or undesirable, to think of state institutions as made up of individuals who can prescribe rules as to how people should live (Swift 139). However, a "moral" politician or policy maker would not necessarily seek to indoctrinate others with those morals. So perhaps it would be desirable, especially for a sen-

sitive issue like the distribution of wealth, to prescribe what one wishes of a “good” politician or policy maker, as Buddhist ethics shows.

Buddhism provides us with the *sutta* on the “Wheel-Turning Emperor” (*Cakkavatti Sutta*), which outlines the virtues a just ruler should have and what policies he or she should be seeking. The role of a morally good ruler “is to ensure a peaceful and harmonious society, free of poverty” providing shelter and security, offering wealth and necessities to the needy, their dominions remaining prosperous and progressing (Harvey, *Buddhist Ethics* 113). This bears a striking resemblance to the welfare-model along the Liberal Egalitarian side of the debate. Max Weber notes that due to the emperor Aśoka, the idea of a welfare state first appeared in India (242). Aśoka implemented policies in the support of the elderly, the orphaned and recently released prisoners as well as a working medical system (Harvey, *Buddhism* 76), financed through public taxation (Mookerji 136).

Buddhism’s expectations for a just ruler are generally in line with Western expectations of the institutions of power. The difference is that Buddhism gives us an individual figure, with individual responsibilities, who will provide “just” leadership by following Buddhist virtues and who is not just preaching morals but is living according to those codes. In the Western debate, on the other hand, it is the state apparatus as a whole which may have to respect and enforce citizens’ (property) rights or treat citizens with equal respect and concern, but the individual politician and his and her moral inclinations is not considered (at least not explicitly). It seems to be forgotten that institutions of power are made up of individual human beings. The Western debate could, therefore, be developed by introducing the idea that those who control the institutions of power should live up to moral expectations and responsibilities as individuals. In the Western debate, a moral code for the individual politician is missing, possibly to the detriment of justice and the morals

that the Western debate may preach for whole state institutions, as the His Holiness the Dalai Lama argues:

The reason why justice and equality is not realized in our societies today is ... the result of a dearth of moral and ethical political leadership. ... According to Buddhist dharma, the true politician is born to serve the needs of the governed. What stands in the way of the blossoming of a just and equal society are politicians who use their office selfishly and not for the good of all. (Boyd 55)

The debate needs a more human-centered approach towards the state, looking at each and every individual who together make up and form the state. Perhaps by “re-humanizing” the state the debate could play a role in improving citizen-state dialogue, which often appears distant and cynical, each failing to see the “individuals” that make up the other (Sivaraksa 57).

The Buddhist “guideline for politicians” can inform the Western debate further. Weber writes that Aśoka’s welfare state was built on spiritual welfare and charities on one hand and rational and economic action on the other (242). Aśoka encouraged people to look after each other, as outlined in an inscription: “Commendable is liberality to friends and relatives through generosity, courtesy, benevolence, by treating them as one treats himself” (Mookerji 135). Spiritual welfare, therefore, here means the encouragement of friendly emotions and charity. Also, the *Cakkavatti Sutta* lists a “harmonious society” among the expectations of a good ruler. Whereas “rational and economic action” to be fulfilled by the state is discussed in the debate, there is no discussion on the state’s role to encourage social cooperation, only on its role of enforcement. Obviously, Aśoka’s inscription is contrary to the liberal conviction that people should be left free to live the life they envision. However, it is to be remembered that liberals argue that the state cannot encourage

a certain way of life. However, liberals do not answer the question whether or not it is contrary to the liberal ideals if the state is concerned with the emotional welfare of people. As Wilkinson and Pickett have stated,

Politics was once seen as a way of improving people's social and emotional well-being by changing their economic circumstances ... but the bigger picture has been lost ... However, it is clear that income distribution provides policy makers with a way of improving the psychosocial well-being of whole populations. Politicians have an opportunity to do genuine good. (Wilkinson and Pickett 238)

Wilkinson and Pickett's statement obviously favors the Liberal Egalitarian side of the debate. But importantly here, it shows that the concern for the psychological welfare of people by the state is not necessarily in conflict with liberal philosophy and may be useful in creating at least a Liberal Egalitarian "guideline for the good politician" and takes a holistic approach towards humans.

Whereas even the "good life" in Western debates seems to be framed in "material" terms, Buddhism considers "spiritual" as well as "material" wealth. Buddhist morals give us an opportunity to re-examine our measures for effective government. After all, the Tibetan Exile State in its Charter says that government "is to work toward promoting the moral and material welfare of the Tibetan people" (Boyd 26). Bhutan, a state influenced by Buddhism, includes the "happiness" of its population as a priority in policymaking and has created the "Gross National Happiness" (GNH) indicator to supplement the economic indicators (Asian Development Bank 10).

### **Buddhism on “Positive” Duties Versus Rights and Equality Inherent in Individuals**

In the Western debate, individuals are assumed to be rational, self-interested rights-holders (“homo economicus”) who are prepared to act justly but who are also limited in their social and altruistic motivations and will not abandon their interests, especially regarding their wealth (Rawls, *Theory* 282). Buddhism, on the other hand, perceives human beings as potentially compassionate individuals, once they have realized that they are mutually dependent on another, and includes conceptions of duties and responsibilities, which in the case of the compassionate Buddhist, are considered positive, not obligatory. Buddhism provides the debate with an example of how changing the way that people are perceived can change the way we think about rights and duties (Inada 3).

Buddhist ethics, based on the principle of mutual interdependence, includes reciprocal duties individuals have towards each other.<sup>2</sup> Keown argues that Buddhist ethics teaches us that each individual forms part of a system sustaining and promoting social justice and order (“Human Rights” 21). The five precepts can thereby be considered as a list of duties: not to harm, not to steal, not to lie, not to misuse sex, not to become intoxicated. In the Western perspectives, individuals are not conceived to have duties; rather, they have rights, which may be removed if they behave badly. As Elizabeth Anderson says, “only incentives contingently attached to rights could provide a rational, self interested individual to conform with any duties” (171). In Buddhist ethics, however, there is no explicit concept of rights. Academics, such as Keown, have argued that inasmuch as duties are seen to be naturally related to rights, it is possible to assume an implicit concept of rights in

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<sup>2</sup> It is to be noted that there is substantial academic debate around the nature of Buddhist ethics. Whereas some, like Keown, argue that Buddhist ethics is a virtue ethic, others believe that it is deontological or utilitarian in nature. In this essay, it is assumed that Buddhist ethics is a virtue ethic.

Buddhism (*Buddhism* 105). But rights language is not used by Buddhists unless necessary as it is seen as demand driven, aggressive and self centered (Harvey, *Buddhist Ethics* 119). Buddhism talks about duties and implies rights: the Western tradition talks about rights and implies duties. Through this distinction, Buddhism informs the debate by pointing out that the Western perspectives are selfish, focused on the rights of the individuals and do not consider the development of virtues within individuals.

Buddhist ethic's talk of duties rather than rights is founded on a conception of equality inherent in humanity, as no person, whatever his or her social standing and other characteristics, seeks pain and suffering but rather seeks the good things in life (Boyd 45). Buddhism's foundation is spiritual, based on the conception that all beings want happiness and do not want suffering. The Western foundation is economic. It is true that Dworkin, in his notion of equal concern and respect, refers to human beings as "capable of suffering and frustration ... (and) capable of forming and acting on intelligent conceptions of how their lives should be lived" (Donnelly 44). However, Dworkin's conception of equality does not hinge on happiness and suffering but rather on the way people are treated by the government. Thus, Dworkin is an example of a contributor without a spiritual foundation.

The Buddhist perception of equality could be the basis for counseling individuals on the responsibilities they have towards each other. As the Dalai Lama says, we will be able to develop compassion towards others only when we realize that everyone is the same in having the wish to avoid pain and suffering" (Dresser 82). This is applicable to questions regarding the distribution of wealth. Rajavaramuni writes:

Good and praiseworthy wealthy people are those who seek wealth in a rightful way and use it for the good and happiness of both themselves and others ... Accordingly the

Buddha's lay-disciples, being wealthy, liberally devoted much of their wealth to the alleviation of suffering or poverty of others. (44)

Buddhism relies on the compassion and sense of responsibility of people towards each other whereas the Western debate assumes no such emotions. It regards generosity and pity as too arbitrary a foundation for finding a just solution regarding the distribution of wealth. However, it is arguable that the Western tradition is materialistic, especially on the Libertarian side, accepting poverty and inequalities and seeing a "welfare state" as tyrannical, which undermines a sense of social cooperation, justice and orderliness between individuals (Schumacher 248). Even on the Liberal Egalitarian side, it is one's own interest which underlies any social cooperation. Swift defends the doctrine of liberalism by saying that it is "a doctrine about what the state can do to and for its citizens. Since the ... state is a ... means whereby free and equal citizens make and help each other to do things, this amounts to saying that it is a doctrine about how people should treat one another as citizens" (152). However, the very fact that the Western positions concede the need to have the state uphold social cooperation shows, according to Wilkinson and Pickett, that the attempt to provide a shared vision capable of inspiring individuals to create a better society is being abandoned and that instead, the only thing everyone is encouraged to strive for is to enhance their own position as individuals (4).

Because in the West, social cooperation is enforced from outside, Nozick notes that "duties" are also referred to negatively as "moral prohibitions," etc. (6). In Buddhist ethics, however, duties are not seen as something external and oppressive but as something that will be considered positive and in the interest of every individual. Buddhism thereby challenges the debate's assumption that the term "duty" is to be related to coercion and unwillingness.

It is true that Buddhist ethics also contain some recognition of self-interest. Generosity is a morally good action that also helps the giver accumulate good karma and eventually reach enlightenment. However, that does not make the act of giving selfish; it is, rather, as Puri notes, that “individual betterment and perfection on the one hand and social good on the other are fundamentally interrelated and interdependent ...” (1).

Buddhist ethics here may resemble a “social contract model” as used by some Liberal Egalitarians in which we have duties of social cooperation in our own interest towards each other. In Buddhism, however, individuals are not generally acting for the sake of particular outcomes, not even in reaching enlightenment, but rather act from their own wisdom and compassion, which will lead to a sense of happiness and willingness in fulfilling duties (“positive duties”). In other words, Buddhist ethics are more about the development and practice of virtues<sup>3</sup> than in seeking a particular form of society or material well-being or in fulfilling duties imposed from without. As the Dalai Lama explains:

When I say we should be compassionate, this does not mean helping others at the expense of ourselves... Sometimes I say that Buddhas ... are the most selfish of all ... because by cultivating altruism they achieve ultimate happiness ... The selfishness of the Buddhas ... is functional and efficient. It allows them not only to achieve awakening, but also the capacity to help others. (Ouaki 46)

It may be argued that a duty must be linked to some prohibition or it would not be enforceable. In the Western debate, justice is rooted in the power of the state to enforce correlative duties. It may also be argued

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that a willing act of kindness is charity rather than the fulfillment of a duty, as outlined by Libertarians. However, these replies miss the point of how Buddhist ethics can inform the debate on this level. Let me give an example from the Tibetan exile community.

The Tibetan Exile State Charter, in Article 13, introduces the “Obligations of the Citizens.” These include: “to comply and observe the Charter and (its laws) ... (and) to pay taxes imposed in accordance with the laws.”<sup>4</sup> The tax spoken of is the “voluntary freedom tax” (*chatrel*), considered affordable by every exile Tibetan and a symbol of contribution to the exile Tibetan government (Roemer 127). Thereby, the amount of the tax to be paid is fixed according to a gradual system with a minimum amount depending on age and income and the liberty of every exile Tibetan to pay more (*ibid*). The key idea behind *Chatrel* is that although it is voluntary, it is expected: “The payment of *Chatrel* is not only the right but also the responsibility of the Tibetan people. All Tibetans must pay voluntary tax.”<sup>5</sup> The word “voluntary” can be seen as reflecting the Buddhist focus on positive duties. The Tibetan Exile State has no formal enforcement mechanisms upon non-payment. However, in practice, it will be impossible to get international aid moneys for those Tibetans who fail to pay the tax (Roemer 129), international aid money being one of the main financial sources for the Tibetan Exile State and for the realization of the welfare state.

The difference between *Chatrel* and taxation in Western countries lies not in practice but in the assumed state-citizen relationship and the meaning of duties. *Chatrel*'s aim is not to redistribute from “the rich to the poor” but rather for the citizens to show sympathy and agreement with the Tibetan Exile State and the Charter (Roemer 127). The *Chatrel* system also underlines the Buddhist perception of duties. Sen writes that

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/t100000\\_.html](http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/t100000_.html)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.chatrel.com/Default.asp?LN=guidelines.htm>

they should not be something painful to fulfill but rather should be based on a sense of agreement, happiness and free choice, especially as the “freedom of choice makes us accountable for what we do” (*Idea* 19). Although it is arguable that the resulting consequences upon non-payment of *Chatrel* do not actually offer a free choice, it still offers a theoretical contrast to the Western debate’s perception of duties on both sides as something painful, coercive or unacceptable if in disagreement with rights.

The way Buddhism approaches and justifies duties, whether between individuals or the state and citizens, is through a “motivational support to morality,” namely karma (DeLue 390). As summarized by Rajavaramuni, “by being used for the benefit of oneself and others, wealth improves social welfare, thus contributing to individual perfection, which in turn leads to a greater social good” (53). The acquisition of good karma also underlies the system of *Chatrel*. Although karma would not seem to be applicable to the debate, it illuminates the motives underlying a concept of justice. Rawls, for example, has attempted to create such motivational support through the assumption of a “reasonable moral psychology” (*Justice* 195). He says, as “reasonable and rational people, citizens are ready and willing to do their part on the fair arrangements (of the social contract) provided they have sufficient assurance that others will also do theirs” (*Justice* 196). The difference between Rawls’s standard and the logic of karma is that the latter appeals to the human as an emotional being with doubts and wishes beyond the mere respect for her rights. On the other hand, Rawls also introduced a theory of self-respect, in which an individual, through performing acts appreciated by others, may gain self-respect (DeLue 390). This comes closer to a more emotion-based approach to motivational support.

The perspective of Buddhist ethics can enrich the debate by offering a humanistic approach, offering a sense of willing responsibility in

the individual, rather than viewing human beings simply as homo economicus. And lending more emphasis to duties could prove helpful, particularly in the relationship between state and citizens, and between citizens themselves where dialogue on the distribution of wealth occurs.

### **Buddhism on Freedom from Deprivation and on Non-Attachment and Contentment**

The Western debate's conceptions of liberty are related to ideas of freedom from interference with one's affairs, freedom to buy things, freedom from discrimination, etc., conceptions which are related to the social, legal and economic circumstances of an individual (Swift 51). Buddhist ethics, on the other hand, outlines a conception of liberty on the mental level of individuals, rather than one related to their material circumstances: Boyd argues that "a true Buddhist practitioner's interpretation of liberty is more than just external freedom...it is more concerned with humanity's internal development" (49), something considered only to a limited extent in the Western debate. Further, Buddhist ethics deals with freedom from sustenance deprivation, something that is not considered in much detail within the debate.

According to Buddhism, real freedom lies in the virtues of "non-attachment" and "contentment." Sizemore and Swearer define non-attachment as a mental state in which one "possesses and uses material things but is not possessed or used by them" (2). The Buddhist attitude to the accumulation and holding of wealth is that wealth is considered positive as long as it is acquired without harming anyone, which aligns with the Libertarian side of the debate, and as long as one wants to do good with it, an idea arguably resembling Liberal Egalitarianism. The difference between the Buddhist virtue of non-attachment and the other ideas lie in the aim. Whereas, as Dworkin says, political philosophy aims

to define fair political economic structures within which individual citizens will make their own decisions how to live their lives (“Foundations” 197), Buddhist ethics aims towards enlightenment. As the latter is a religious concept, Buddhism cannot inform the debate through the virtue of non-attachment much further than pointing out that it is useful within a system of social cooperation.

The virtue of “contentment,” on the other hand, Tachibana defines as “the mental condition of a person who is satisfied with what he possesses or obtains, in which he finds himself” (124). Persons should not be greedy and have an insatiable urge to accumulate wealth. This even applies to “poor” people, who have met a minimum economic wellbeing: Sizemore and Swearer argue that Buddhism is mainly concerned with the human response to material scarcity and that therefore poverty in Buddhism is a problem of improper desire or attitudes (2). In the Western debate, Dworkin, for instance, mentions that the envy he refers to is not a psychological one but economic (“Foundations” 223), thereby explicitly excluding any notion of “mental” freedom. Nothing else in the debate resembles the idea of contentment.

Again, the virtue of contentment is a religious concept, involved with reaching enlightenment. However, as we saw with the concept of non-attachment, the ideas behind Buddhist virtues can figure in one way or another in the debate. Can “contentment” inform the debate? It makes sense to answer this question by referring to the conceptions of liberty in the debate, which as Dworkin says, is designed to protect people’s own conceptions about the good life and their own responsibility to design their lives based on these convictions (“Liberty” 49). It is not the role of the state to tell people what a good life is, let alone tell them how to feel about their wealth, something that would, however, have to figure in the debate if “contentment” was to be an issue. For the Libertarian side of the debate, counseling people to be content with what they

have would seem plausible but obviously of no meaningful use, as such a suggestion would not have the same motivational support as in Buddhism. The virtue of contentment, therefore, cannot inform the debate.

However, “non-attachment” and “contentment” do remind us that material wealth is no guarantee for freedom and contentment in the mind. This is relevant to the debate. The debate as outlined frames the distribution of wealth around rights. It avoids issues of the human mind, maybe because this defies measurement or definitive results. But in ignoring once again the human herself, and the mind itself, making the assumptions that the material rights to property, equality of opportunity, etc., achieve the goal of the good life, we forget whether this is truly achieved in the state of mind of a society. Wilkinson and Pickett write, “It is a paradox that, at the pinnacle of human material achievement, we find ourselves prone to depression, driven to consume and with little or no community life ...” (3).

Moreover, Buddhism considers all of its teachings applicable only if individuals have the economic circumstances necessary to be able to follow spiritual development. Deprivation of basic human necessities, such as food or water, will prevent any individual from being able to satisfy basic human needs and sustain bodily functions. David Loy concludes that deprivation is the “root cause of immoral behavior such as theft, violence and falsehood” (*Great Awakening* 57). Buddhists also believe, according to Fenn, that various action-reaction scenarios will lead to a process of social disintegration and human degradation once deprivation is introduced into society. Therefore, Buddhist ethics, within the framework of moral codes for “good rulers,” considers deprivation as an unnecessary and dangerous evil which every rightful politician needs to aim to eliminate (118). Within the Western debate some contributors from both sides, like Sen or Hayek, have agreed that a minimum of economic wellbeing must be given before the debate can take place mea-

ningfully. However, deprivation is not an issue in many other theories, either due to the assumption that everyone has met a minimum of economic wellbeing (Swift 26) or possibly because it is impliedly assumed that arrangements like social contracts or notions like Van Parijs's "minimal basic income" will alleviate deprivation. But, it should be made clear, especially on the Libertarian side, whether theories are applicable in circumstances of deprivation and whether redistribution of wealth by the state would be justified to ail extreme conditions. It is arguable that none of the contributors to the debate are in favor of accepting severe deprivation in society and consider it a natural-given to eliminate it before a society can be just. They do not even consider it as part of the debate. This suggests that the theories are applicable only to societies in which there is no such deprivation. However, it would be impossible to find such a society. These theories also would not be applicable to societies in which the resources to eliminate such initial deprivation are not present (Pogge 39). Buddhism here highlights a lacuna in the debate, one which needs to be addressed explicitly. The Buddhist notion of deprivation is also one that concerns a real problem facing any society, and the debate, trying to find solutions for the just treatment of property of every individual in society, must not miss out on defining its point of departure.

### **Buddhism on Socio-economic Rights**

As we have seen, the debate is based upon a basic list of civil-political human rights. Socio-economic rights are omitted even though they seem particularly relevant to the debate. In contrast, Buddhist ethics has acted as the basis for engaged Buddhists, who as Puri writes, "seek to actualize Buddhism's traditional ideals of wisdom and compassion in the contemporary world" (1). Human rights, including socio-economic rights, play an important role.

As we have seen, the language of rights only figures implicitly in Buddhism, based on the duties the Buddha has counseled individuals to embrace. Obviously, therefore, human rights language also does not exist within Buddhism. If we understand human rights to be those which are universally, equally and inalienably applicable to and inherent in the species of *homo sapiens* (Donnelly 10), it seems that human rights are implied in Buddhist ethics. Peter Harvey argues that “Vulnerable beings are ... the “owners” of rights in Buddhism, with the locus of their value seen as their ability to suffer, their vulnerability, and their potential for enlightenment” (*Buddhist Ethics* 119). He continues, “while aggressively demanding rights is not in tune with the spirit of Buddhism, being ... determined on upholding rights, particularly of other people, is so” (119). Human rights to Buddhists are, therefore, a tool of a compassionate individual to support the vulnerable in ending their suffering. As the Dalai Lama argues, the Buddhist concept of compassion should make us concerned and interested in human rights (Dresser 82).

Human rights, especially socio-economic ones, would also seem a useful tool to Liberal Egalitarians to support their idea of a welfare state and justify a redistribution of wealth. Whereas the functional focus would be on the right of the individual, to food, shelter, education, etc. against the state, rather than an interest of others to help each other in ending suffering, it still would act as a powerful justification towards citizens for “interfering” with their wealth. It can be replied that human rights are not universally accepted, and Rawls, for example, argues that his basic list of rights and liberties are the only ones necessary to provide the political and social conditions necessary for adequate development (*Justice* 45). Rawls also assumes a minimum provision of economic well-being as given and provides for equal education, etc., with his difference principle (*Theory* 275). Socio-economic rights, to Rawls, may be superfluous. However, what is thereby forgotten is that human rights are legally binding on states, whether we believe in their universality

and usefulness or not. Therefore, their power as tools should be recognized as is done by engaged Buddhists.

The Dalai Lama, in an address to the United Nations, affirmed his commitment to human rights:

It is very often the most gifted, dedicated and creative members of society who become victims of human rights abuses. Thus the political, social, cultural and economic developments of a society are obstructed by the violations of human rights. Therefore, the protection of these rights and freedoms are of immense importance both for the individuals affected and for the development of the society as a whole. (Keown, "Human Rights" xvii)

This commitment is translated into the Charter of the Tibetan Exile State, in which Article 4 states: "It (is) the duty of the (Tibetan Exile State) to adhere to the principles of the UDHR ... and (it) shall emphasize ... the safeguarding of their social, cultural, religious and political rights"

<sup>6</sup> This suggests that the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Exile State have recognized the interdependent and interrelated nature of all human rights necessary to create an altogether flourishing and just society, as expressed also in the Vienna Declaration of the World Conference of Human Rights in 1993. However, within the debate, specifically the Libertarian side, socio-economic rights are perceived as the cause of unjustified interference with a person's liberty and wealth, as Kelley argued: "Liberty rights reflect an individualist political philosophy that prizes freedom, welfare rights a collectivist one that is willing to sacrifice freedom" (Steiner 286). The reason for this rejection may lie in the widely held belief that the realization of socio-economic rights demands the provision of resources in the form of taxation whereas civil-political rights do not

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<sup>6</sup> [http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/t100000\\_.html](http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/t100000_.html)

(Steiner 295). This prejudice has been proven to be wrong; the realization of socio-political rights also demands resources, as even accepted by Nozick (27). However, Libertarians still see socio-economic rights as unjustified tools abused by the state to justify taxation (Pogge 70). Behind the Libertarian philosophy is one of “unfettered markets,” which is considered the best basis for the development of social, economic and cultural aspects of a society. It is argued by Friedman that by imposing uniform standards in, for example, housing and schooling, government can improve the level of living of many but that it would thereby replace progress by stagnation and substitute mediocrity for variety (4). However, the Dalai Lama outlined a view of such development of society through the provision of civil-political and socio-economic rights, therefore in direct conflict with the Libertarians’ view. Perhaps it is time for Libertarians to re-think their philosophy in the light of binding international human rights agreements and to consider that, rather than interfering with the liberty of one productive individual, socio-economic rights and their realization could lead to an even wider development of the social, economic and cultural aspects through complementing civil-political rights.

### **Conclusion**

It is a striking characteristic of the Western debate that even though it aims to find solutions to the seemingly simple question how far property rights should be protected and respected in society, it has spun a web of grander questions and answers concerning concepts like justice, rights, equality and liberty. The way Buddhism informs the debate is not through answering the focal question, but rather by digging deeper into these “grander” ideas upon which the answers to the focal question concerning the distribution of wealth are based. Both Buddhism and the debate pursue conceptions like equality and freedom but in different ways.

Martha Nussbaum's summary of the two sides of the debate over compassion is just as applicable for the purpose of outlining the different conceptions of the debate and Buddhism. She writes:

One (side) sees the ... task of community as the provision of support for basic needs; bringing human beings together through the thought of their common weakness and risk, it constructs a moral emotion that is suited to supporting efforts to aid the worst off. The other sees society as the kingdom of free ... beings, held together by the awe they feel for the worth of reason in one another; the function of their association will be to assist the moral development of each by judgments purified of passion." (368)

Due to the centrality of human rights within the debate and the different ways Buddhism has been argued to inform this debate, Buddhism can also inform the role and nature of human rights and duties in Western political philosophy. First, a rights-based morality within society is no guarantee for justice. Justice still needs to be promoted by individuals (Sen, *Idea* 82), who may also justifiably be interested in the holistic, i.e., economic and psychological wellbeing, of the population without defying the liberal political aim. The mere provision of human rights is therefore no cure to an unjust society. Also, the role of rights, specifically the right to property, within the debate is framed so that rights may be assumed "to promote individualism or even egoism, and lead persons to view themselves as ... atomized, autonomous ... and self-interested individuals ready to insist on their rights no matter what the cost may be to others or society at large" (Pogge 52). Responsibility and human emotions are locked out and replaced by rights and duties, it seems. Buddhism has shown that there are different ways rights and duties may be perceived, linked to the way humankind is defined. Further, the protection and respect for rights cannot guarantee and act as a measurement

of success for the total wellbeing of individuals (Pogge 230). Human happiness is something human rights can only help to achieve. Lastly, Buddhism has reminded us of the existence, importance and binding nature of socio-economic rights. These play a central role in asking the contributors of the debate to clarify their position on deprivation of individuals in our societies.

I have argued that the debate is one based on what Loy calls “moneytheism,” (Loy, “Buddhism and Money” 297), i.e., the primacy of money and economic wellbeing in considering rights, equality, etc. Also, I have argued that the debate is one based on an institutional, mechanical and rational outlook on society, the state and individuals. The Liberal Egalitarian side of the debate is more in line with Buddhism than the Libertarian side. Buddhist ethics, in theory and in practice, has its weaknesses and strengths and is, after all, religious and therefore not necessarily applicable to secular political philosophy. Nevertheless, because Buddhists aim, like Western political philosophers, to discern what is a moral and just thing to do, their conceptions can inform each other; here, Buddhism has informed the debate.

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