

## Chapter 01

# Implications of the Ethical Teachings of the Buddha for the Notion of Human Rights

P. D. Premasiri

*University of Peradeniya*

---

### Introduction

The teachings of the Buddha are quite obviously characterized by a very rich ethical content. The Buddha's ethical teachings have been conveyed in a language consisting of Buddhist ethical terms for which we can find close parallels in modern Western languages as well. However, it has been observed that Buddhism is lacking in an ethical term that closely corresponds to the term 'right' used in the sense of a moral claim. One could reasonably describe the ultimate goal of Buddhism as the promotion of peace and happiness through the ethical transformation of the individual who is the primary unit of society so that it will also eventually have a positive effect on the peace and happiness of all humans. The fundamental problem of all humans is seen as the persisting experience of suffering (*dukkha*), which manifests both physically and psychologically. It is a system of thought that admits the continuity of individuated existence despite its denial of an indwelling permanent entity conceived as the *Ātman* or Soul, Buddhism deals with the problem of suffering as extending over repeated births in a cyclic process of existence of which no first beginning is conceivable.

The root causes of suffering, whether it is in the existential sense applicable to the present life, or to the possible lives in repeated births of the future as admitted in the Buddhist doctrine, are identified as greed (*lobha*),

hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*). The basis for the moral evaluation of human behaviour in Buddhism rests primarily on the tendency of certain states of mind and the behaviour causally springing from those states to incur suffering for the individual concerned as well as the society with which individuals interact, these three states of mind are designated as *akusalamūla*, the roots of whatever is unethical. They are also considered as the underlying causes of all unethical actions that find expression in the thinking processes as well as verbal and physical behaviour of humans. As long as these roots persist, they give rise to the suffering of the individual while at the same time the interactions resulting from the conduct of such individuals in the wider social context give rise to numerous social problems that produce suffering which in turn permeate into every level of social living.

We would not be concerned about human rights unless the violation of human rights, or the non-recognition of them involves the production of suffering for human beings. Concerns about human rights are raised due to the fact that immense human suffering has resulted at many points in the history of human kind from the behaviour of humans themselves in the form of the violation of the rights of their own fellow men.

When the issue of rights is considered from the standpoint of the teachings of the Buddha, one observation generally made is that there is no exact corresponding term in the Buddhist language that stands for rights in the sense of a claim by any individual or a group of individuals. The ethical use of the term right as opposed to wrong can reasonably be attributed to the Buddha's use of language, but it is only by implication that it is possible to engage in a discussion of the Buddha's perceptions on the notion of human rights in the sense in which it is used in contemporary moral discourse. This is one major reason why we have chosen to discuss in this paper, the implications of the Buddha's teachings for the notion of human rights instead of directly dealing with any identifiable Buddhist concept of human rights. In this enquiry, the principal source used will be the Suttapiṭaka of the Pali canon in consideration of the widely accepted view that it contains the most authentic collection of the Buddha's teachings.

## **Current Literature on Buddhism and Human Rights**

Prof. K.N. Jayatilleke, in the fourth of a series of five lectures delivered in 1967, attributes to the Buddha a social contract theory of the origin of society and the state and expresses the opinion that it has implications for the doctrine of human rights (441-567). Prof. L.P.N. Perera in his work on *Buddhism and Human Rights* gives a detailed Buddhist commentary on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 10<sup>th</sup> December 1948 (145 pages). He attempts to show that each and every item of the UDHR is compatible with the ethical teachings of the Buddha. Damien Keown raises the question as to whether Buddhism contains a doctrine of human rights and gives a kind of qualified affirmative answer to it. He expresses the opinion that it is legitimate to speak of both “rights” and “human rights” in Buddhism, although it cannot be considered as a subject area on which traditional Buddhism seriously focused attention, and sets out to propose a conceptual and doctrinal basis for human rights in Buddhism (Keown, 1995: 27).

## **The Nature of Humans and the Sources of Human Dignity According to the Buddha’s Teaching**

In the Western world, a special dignity came to be attached to the human being, particularly in terms of its dominant Judeo-Christian religious ideology. Humans are represented as a spark of the divine in original creation with the right conferred upon them by the Creator Himself to exercise dominance over the rest of creation, fauna and flora. Humans are believed to have been created in the image and likeness of God. The source of a doctrine of human dignity in Buddhism is quite different mainly due to the fact that Buddhism is a non-theistic religion. According to the Buddha’s teaching, humans are just one class of living beings among diverse forms of life spread over numerous planes of cosmic existence. They are merely a product of the evolutionary and cyclic process of the physical and biological universe. In the Aggañña Sutta of the Dīghanikāya, the Buddha rejects the claims to superiority of the Brahmin caste as asserted by Brahmins based on the supposition that the entire order of the universe including human society was a creation of Brahmā. He points

out that the caste divisions of society emerged under certain conventions established by humans themselves based on certain economic needs of the time classifying humans who were originally equal and by no means different by nature (*tesaṃ ñeva sattānaṃ anaññesaṃ sadisānaṃ ñeva no asadisānaṃ*) into different occupational groups (III. 93).

The cosmological teachings attributed to the Buddha maintain that there are living beings inhabiting certain realms of the universe that could be described as divine, who experience a predominance of bliss or happiness, while there also are those born into hellish realms where the experience is extremely woeful. Life in all these numerous planes of existence is considered to be impermanent. No living being including human and divine is believed to be possessed of an eternal Self or Soul. To be born as a human being is considered to be a rare opportunity although humans are considered as a species of beings who are destined to experience a mixture of happiness and unhappiness, pleasure and pain. According to the Buddhist doctrine of survival after death in the cyclic process of existence, it is possible for a human being to regress into lower states at the end of one's human life. Depending upon the kind of character traits cultivated during one's human life time there is the possibility for one to rearise in a subhuman condition after death. In such an event, it becomes extremely difficult to re-emerge in the human condition. It is said that in the sphere of lower animals, there is no opportunity for ethical or equitable living but just living according to the law of the jungle, the stronger preying on the weaker creatures (Saṃyuttanikāya (S.N.) PTS Vol. V: 456).

The fundamental nature of a human being is said to be good. The human mind is compared to a piece of gold ore which is covered by the defilements of iron, copper, tin, lead and silver, but it can be cleansed so that its inherent lustre may shine forth (Aṅguttaranikāya II.16). It is due to the presence of defilements at different levels as gross, medium and subtle that human conduct produces harmful consequences in social interaction. The gross defilements produce misconduct through body, speech and mind (*kāya...vacī...manoduccaritam*). The medium defilements produce lustful, malicious and injurious thoughts (*kāma...vyāpāda...vihimsā vitakko*). The

subtle defilements produce thoughts of racial pride, national discrimination, and superiority complexes that lead to seeing other humans different from the group to which one belongs as unequal and inferior (*jāti...janapada...avaññattapaṭisaṃyutto vitakko*) (Samyuttanikāya (S.N.) PTS Vol. I: 454).

Although differences in the character traits of human beings may exist due to the diversity of factors that influence them, it is emphatically stated that birth as a human being affords the greatest opportunity to reach the most valuable attainments of sentient life such as the perfect worthiness in the human condition (*arahatta*) or full enlightenment (*sammāsambodhi*). A fully enlightened person who puts a final end to all manner of suffering along with the root causes of it, and teaches to the rest of humanity the way to end suffering after realizing it oneself, and is then considered to be the supreme being in the whole universe. Such a person is said to deserve the respect and veneration of all human and divine beings. There is no attainment which is superior to the destruction of what Buddhism sees as the evil or unwholesome traits of character which are referred to in its psychological language as unethical psychological influxes (*āsavā*), dormant unethical tendencies (*anusayā*), ethically defiling mental states (*kiḷesā*) and hindrances that conceal the inherent luminosity of the human mind (*nīvaraṇāni*).

As the Dhammapada says, life as a human is obtainable with difficulty, and far more difficult is it for someone to become a fully enlightened Buddha. (*Kicco Buddhānam uppādo*- Dhammapada Verse 182) Buddhist mythology transformed the highest divine beings in the pre-Buddhist Vedic pantheon into devotees of the Buddha who was a human being. Brahmā, traditionally conceived as the creator of the world and all forms of life in it, is depicted in canonical Buddhist mythical stories as lacking in depth of knowledge and understanding of a Buddha who is human. Brahmā Sahampati, traditionally believed to be the “Lord of Creation” respectfully invites the Buddha to teach to the world of men and gods what the Buddha discovered through the enlightenment he attained with self-effort. In Theragāthā Verses 628-629, the supreme deities Indra and Brahma are represented as worshipping at the feet of an enlightened disciple of the Buddha named Sunīta, who was before his entry into the Buddhist Order, a scavenger calling him a great person (*purisuttama*)

having superior understanding (*purisājañña*). Buddhism denies the existence of any divine or heavenly realm in which life is eternal. In the Itivuttaka, the Buddha is presented as saying that for the gods, at the time of their departure from their heavenly realms, obtaining a human life is considered as going into a good destiny (*manussattaṃ ...devānaṃ sugatigamana- saṅkhātāṃ-77*). According to early Buddhist teaching, Buddhas are born only in the world of humans.

The Buddha did not attribute the dignity of a human being to class, caste, colour or nationality, to which he/she belonged. In the Ambaṭṭha Sutta of the Dīghanikāya, he expressed his agreement with the statement that one who is endowed with knowledge and good conduct is the most dignified person (*Vijjācaraṇasampanno so seṭṭho devamānuse – I.99*). In the Esukāri Sutta of the Majjhimanikāya, addressing a Brahmin who was obsessed with a sense of caste superiority, the Buddha says that he does not consider caste, colour or wealth (*uccākulīnatā, uḷāraṇṇatā, uḷārabhogatā*) to be a reason for attributing dignity to a person, but that ethical development definitely is. (II.179). In the Vāsetṭha Sutta, of the Suttanipāta (Verse 14) he removed the discriminatory racial meaning attached to the term Brāhmaṇa during his time and insisted that a person's birth to a particular family line does not make one either dignified (*brāhmaṇa*) or undignified (*vasala*). Here the Buddha quite emphatically affirms the equality of humankind arguing that there are no adequate grounds among human beings as in other forms of biological nature to group them into different species (*Yathā etāsu jātīsu liṅgaṃ jātīmayam puthu - evaṃ natthi manussānaṃ liṅgaṃ jātīmayam puthu*). In the Vāsetṭha Sutta, countering the traditional claim of the Brahmins that inequality among humans was a product of the original cosmic process of creation, the Buddha points out that caste and class divisions in society depended on social conventions adopted in human history at different times and regions but not aspects of the order of nature itself. The Buddha is known to have rejected the Brahmanical concept of inequality among humans resorting to biological, anthropological, sociological, legal, moral, ethical and spiritual arguments (Jayatilleke, 1967: 72-73)

## **The Buddhist Notion of Dhamma and its relevance to the Notion of Human Rights**

In elaborating the point previously made in the introductory section that there is no Buddhist term exactly corresponding to ‘right’ in the sense of a claim, it may be pointed out that many ethical terms corresponding to good, bad, ought, ought not, right, wrong, just, unjust, duty and obligation are found in Buddhist usage. From this terminological fact it cannot be concluded that Buddhism is devoid of a concept of rights in the modern sense of the term or that it shows no concern for human rights. At least implicitly, it has shown a high regard to, and exhibited a deep awareness of, what is understood today as human rights both in theory and practice in various situations involving social and interpersonal relations.

Freedom, equality and solidarity are considered as the pillars on which human rights rest. Freedom of thought, conscience and religion as well as opinion and expression are recognized under freedom. Equal protection against all forms of discrimination in the enjoyment of all human rights, including full equality of women and men are recognized under equality. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights has identified a wide variety of rights such as the right to life, liberty, security of person, equality before the law, privacy, marriage and protection of family life, social security, participation in government, work, protection against unemployment, rest and leisure, a minimum standard of living, and enjoyment of the arts. We need to see if these aspects definitive of human rights have in any way been addressed in Buddhist teachings in order to provide a plausible answer to the question as to whether there is recognition of human rights in Buddhism.

The Buddha’s teaching does not refer to these aspects using the language of rights but considers them under the Buddhist concept of *dhamma*. The term *dhamma* may be said to cover ethical notions such as right living, concern for justice, concern for rights, and fairness in one’s dealings with others. In whatever capacity or role, a person functions in society, if that person cares about the rights of others, such a person can be considered as *dhammiko*. The term *dhammiko* is usually rendered into English as “a righteous person”. A person who enjoys or possesses power or wealth, or whatever benefit

that satisfies a common and legitimate human interest, want or need, is said to enjoy it in accordance with *dhamma*, provided it is done in a righteous manner. The notion of rights can thus be said to be conceptually linked in Buddhism with the concept of righteousness. If any benefit is enjoyed by a person without moral justification, it is blameworthy and therefore *adhamma*, not a rightful enjoyment.

Buddhism identifies four types of unjust behaviour that tend to violate the norms of fairness and justice and become damaging to the rights of others. They are unjust actions performed on the basis of partisan bias (*chanda*), unjust action performed on the basis of hatred, animosity or resentment (*dosa*), unjust action performed due to fear of unpalatable consequences for oneself (*bhaya*) and unjust action performed due to the lack of proper understanding or due to a confused state of mind (*moha*). In Buddhist usage, they are referred to as *agati* meaning resorting to improper conduct.

### **Fulfilment of Duty as a Means of Taking Care of Rights**

Emphasis in the Buddha's teaching has generally been on the performance of each person's duty or duties, depending on the position that a person occupies at a given time within the network of diverse social relationships. From the Buddhist perspective, the notion of duty is more fundamental than the notion of right. Rights are asserted mainly as claims. Buddhist philosophy does not admit the notion of a substantial soul and the idea of a metaphysical person, although as we have already pointed out, Buddhism attaches a sense of dignity to the fact that someone is human. The emphasis on individual claims could generate a heightened sense of the ego, resulting in animosity, hatred and conflict and produce behaviour damaging to the interests of other persons in the interest of one's own. From the Buddhist point of view, persons are not exclusive, autonomous and eternal entities but are conventionally individuated units subject to a network of dependent relationships. It is through mutual understanding and empathy that conflicts of interest among humans ought to be resolved. A heightened sense of ego and group identity usually leads to armed conflict and violence. There is the possibility of individuals or groups making demands based on rights while

totally ignoring their duties. This may be seen as an important reason why Buddhism has not paid much attention to the notion of rights as a claim.

Given the human condition, all human beings have legitimate needs. However, in a world deficient in infinite resources and consisting of persons with limited sympathies, human relationships can generally take an undesirable turn threatening the security of everyone concerned. Those who possess what they desire and need, do want to greedily protect their possessions, and being insatiate, attempt to acquire even more for themselves. Those who are deprived of those needs and possessions develop an envious attitude towards the former whether they have acquired them legitimately or not. This is one of the important considerations among others that necessitates the institution of a social morality in terms of the notion of rights as understood today, or the principles of *dhamma* as understood in traditional Buddhism.

The Buddhist view is that human rights are protected in a network of social relationships based on the recognition of mutual duties. The discourse of the Buddha known as *Sigālovāda Sutta* (discourse on the exhortation to Sigāla), in the *Dīghanikāya* (III.180ff.), speaks of several sectors of society bound by mutual duties in such a way that the correlativity of duty to right is given due recognition. These sectors include parents and children, teachers and pupils, husbands and wives, employers and employees, and lay people and those who devote themselves to a religious life and moral perfection. The nature of mutual relationships recommended in this instance can be illustrated by drawing attention to the relationship between employer and employees. The employer needs to be bound by duty to provide adequate wages and food for the employees in addition to giving them work in accordance with their ability, without overburdening them with work, and providing them with opportunity for leisure and periods of leave or vacation. The employees are bound by duty in turn to give the best benefit of one's skills performing the assigned functions in an orderly and efficient manner with a full sense of commitment.

## **Political, Economic and Legal Rights of the People**

The teaching of the Buddha paid special attention to the economic and political rights of people emphasizing the duties of those responsible for safeguarding them. Buddhism emerged and flourished in a society within which the monarchical power of rulers had the tendency to deteriorate into extreme forms of autocratic and tyrannical rule. The Buddha pointed out that unless a ruler establishes an economic order which provides the conditions for decent living for all citizens within his territory, the people are likely to rise up in revolt against the ruler (Dīghanikāya I.135) He also enumerated in detail the duties of a just ruler (*dhammiko dhammarājā*) who is himself expected to be ruled by the rule of justice or righteousness (*dhamma*) highlighting among the ruler's duties, the necessity to eliminate poverty and large scale economic disparities within the state.

Equality before the law is one of the fundamental rights which Buddhism has affirmed in its view of the administration of justice within the state. Any allegation against a supposed offender, requires in the Buddhist view, the most careful investigation by state authorities, before the alleged offender is proved to be found guilty. In the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, the Buddha speaks in high admiration of the Vajjian constitution pointing out that the Vajjian rulers had a just and fair system of governance, protective of the rights of the citizens. It is said that the Vajjians administered the country without changing rules arbitrarily keeping to consensually established procedures (Dīghanikāya II.74). Buddhaghosa, the renowned commentator of the Theravāda scriptures describes in detail the just judicial procedure which the Vajjian rulers followed in order to ensure the rights of an alleged criminal (Jayatilleke, 1967: 81-82). The Buddhist tradition also recognized the fact that criminal behaviour can be a product of social circumstances and conditions, and advocates a policy of dealing with such behaviour with understanding and sympathetic concern. Using a mythical story, the Buddha shows in the Kūṭadanta Sutta of the Dīghanikāya, how attempts at eliminating crime by resorting to corporal punishment imposed by the state are bound to fail (I.134). According to this story, the counsellor of the king who happened to be Gotama Buddha himself in a previous life, points out to the king that crime could be a consequence

of the people being deprived of the opportunity to satisfy their basic material needs. It is the duty of the state to establish an economic order under which there is sufficient employment for the people so that they can achieve a decent standard of living. Here too, we find that drawing attention to the duties of the state, Buddhist teachings intend to make implicit references to human rights.

Prof. K.N. Jayatilleke has drawn attention to an instance in the Buddhist Jātaka literature which highlights the idea that the common people have a right to even rise in rebellion against a king who does not subscribe to ethical principles in state governance (Jayatilleke, 1967: 83-84). The Bodhisatta (represented in this body of literature as Gotama Buddha in his previous lives) in this Jātaka story calls upon the people to revolt against the king making the people aware that when a ruler betrays the trust that people have placed on the state, they have a right to depose the king or overthrow the state.

### **Right of Humans to be Free from Subjection to Cruel Punishments**

The human right to be free from subjection to cruel punishments even under circumstances in which the state has a justification to punish offenders against the law has been recognized in Buddhist teachings. In this respect, the teaching of the Buddha is in agreement with Articles 3 and 5 adopted in the UDHR of 1948. Buddhism has advocated a rational and humane approach to criminal behaviour. There are many stories in the Buddhist Jātaka literature giving expression to the Buddhist concern about the abuse of power vested in the kings who imposed cruel punishments. It is mentioned in one instance that the kings of the *Mahāsammata* tradition, as represented in the myth of the genesis in the Aggañña Sutta of the Dīghanikāya, did not resort to cruel corporal punishments such as cutting off of hands and feet and execution (*hattha-pāda-chedana-ghātana*), but subjected offenders only to lesser punishments like caning, warning and banishment (*tāḷana-garahana-pabbājana* –Jātaka IV.192).

The Buddha's compassionate attitude relating to punishment for criminal and offensive behaviour had influenced the ideas of the later Buddhist

philosopher named Nāgārjuna. His advice to rulers was to punish criminals with compassion, regarding them as worthy sons, without being moved by hatred or material gain. Such punishments should be imposed from a reformatory perspective and not from a retributive one. The king should attempt to reform even those who have committed terrible sins. Prisoners should be properly looked after during their period of imprisonment providing them with their basic needs, and among those needs are mentioned, barbers, baths, drinks, foods, medicines and garments. Nāgārjuna disapproves of the penalty of life imprisonment and exhorts the king against mutilation or execution of criminals although banishment as a penalty is approved (Jayatilleke, 1967: 70-71 and foot-notes 71-24 of p.71).

### **Democracy and Rights in the Saṅgha Order**

The Buddha established an exclusive spiritual community called the Saṅgha, consisting of persons who renounced the pleasures of the layperson's life in order to attain speedy progress in the spiritual path. Although the predominant system of state administration during the time of the Buddha was monarchical, the Buddha opted to structure the spiritual community he established on the basis of democratic principles. The Buddha did not leave room for any single individual to exercise authority over the community after his demise, but established a consensual system of governance and administration which was democratically structured with the participation of virtuous, senior, learned and capable members of the community. All important matters affecting the community were expected to be determined at assemblies in which all rightful members of the community participated. The meetings were to be presided over by persons appointed on the basis of common consent of the community, and all major decisions affecting the community had to be subjected to open discussion. Before any act of the Saṅgha was passed, it was put before the assembly to seek the approval of the participants and the right to express one's free opinion on matters taken up for discussion was always guaranteed. Such acts were read three times before the community to ensure open discussion and free expression of the opinion of any participant in the proceedings, and adopted only after the fourth reading.

One of the most impressive features illustrated through the principles followed within the Saṅgha organization is that of freedom of speech or expression. Buddhism showed by example in the procedural rules laid down relating to the functioning of the Saṅgha, the importance of upholding and protecting the right of free speech and expression. No act within the Saṅgha was to be passed without allowing the full and free expression of the opinion of every rightful member of the community.

### **The Issue of Women's Rights**

The time in which the Buddha lived was characterized by many limitations on the freedom of women. Buddhist sources themselves show that women were considered in the orthodox Brahmanical belief systems as being inferior to men. In the Somā Sutta of the Saṃyuttanikāya, the prevalent belief is presented through the mouth of the mythical Lord of Death referred to as Māra, who appears before the nun named Somā while she was meditating in the forest and attempts to dissuade her from her spiritual effort saying that women have only two-fingers length of insight and therefore cannot reach the attainments that sages are capable of attaining (*Yaṃ taṃ isīhi pattabbaṃ thānaṃ durabhisambhavaṃ - na taṃ dvaṅgulapaññāya sakkā pappotumitthiyā* (I.129) The nun Somā brushes Māra's objection aside saying that her being a woman is by no means a hindrance to her spiritual goal as long as she possesses insight and sees with penetrative insight the reality of things. Those who support feminist doctrine have raised some objections against Buddhism alleging that the Buddha did not recognize women on an equal footing with men. The Buddha had no hesitation in admitting that women, as much as men were equally capable of attaining the goal of Arahantship, the highest attainment attainable by any disciple in one's immediate life. It has to be admitted that the Buddha introduced extra regulations for women when he, after persuasion by Ven. Ananda decided to open the Saṅgha to female disciples despite his admission that they were equally capable of attaining the perfection of an Arahant. The notion has also developed in the Theravāda Buddhist tradition that women were incapable of attaining the enlightenment of a Buddha. Such notions on this aspect of the Buddha's teachings are considered by some commentators as a consequence of the patriarchal tradition of the time weighing heavily on Buddhist attitudes

on this matter. Some commentators consider on this aspect of the Buddha's teaching as a consequence of the patriarchal tradition of the time weighing heavily on the Buddhist attitudes on this matter (Gross, 1992). However, it is to the credit of the Buddhist tradition that the Buddha rejected a deep-rooted prejudice against feminine birth; The Buddha pointing out to King Kosala in the Saṃyuttanikāya who was saddened by the news of his Queen giving birth to a female child that a female may at times be better than a male (*Itthīpi hi ekacchīyā-seyyā posā janādhīpa*-I.86).

### **Right to Free Choice of Religious Belief**

The Buddha evidently upheld the human right to pursue any religious faith of one's own conviction. He was not keen to make converts to his religion or ideology by forceful or foul means. Even when some persons expressed their willingness to become his devotees, he urged them to reconsider without rushing to any conclusive decision. As mentioned in the Upāli Sutta of the Majjhimanikāya, Upāli, a lay disciple of a rival teacher of the Buddha visited the latter on the instigation of his teacher, motivated by the desire to defeat the Buddha in a doctrinal debate. However, in the course of the conversation with the Buddha, Upāli became strongly inclined to accept the latter's teaching. He eventually requested the Buddha to accept him as a disciple. In this instance, the Buddha wanted Upāli to give further thought to the decision. When Upāli insisted that he was fully convinced about the truth of the Buddha's teaching, the Buddha advised him to continue his patronage to his former teacher even after his conversion to the Buddhist faith (I.379).

As stated in the Kālāma Sutta, the right of a person to critically examine the claims of even a respected teacher as himself was explicitly granted by the Buddha to all those who were impressed by his charismatic personality (Aṅguttaranikāya I.189). He even extended an open invitation to his disciples to thoroughly investigate him closely observing his verbal and physical behaviour for a sufficiently long period of time in order to find out whether he was a truly enlightened person (Majjhimanikāya I.318). He warned his disciples against being averse to criticism and being unduly elated in the face of praise of one's virtues by others (Dīghanikāya I.3). The right that a person

has to criticise the belief or ideology, the religion or the way of life of others appears to be clearly recognized by the Buddha in these instances.

### **Buddhist Affirmation of the Golden Rule Criterion of Morality and its Implications for Human Rights**

In the Veḷudvāreyya Sutta of the Saṃyuttanikāya, we come across a Buddhist version of what is generally conceived as the Golden Rule of Morality in almost all major religious traditions of the world. In this Sutta, the Buddha teaches what he calls *attūpanāyika dhamma* which entails the setting up of a moral standard taking into account the rightful interests and needs of oneself (V.354). Recognizing the relevance of this passage to the principal theme of our discussion, it is fully quoted below:

*Here a noble disciple reflects thus: I really am a person who likes to live and does not like to die. I desire happiness and dislike unhappiness. Suppose someone should deprive me of my life, being a person who likes to live and does not like to die, it would not be pleasing and delightful to me. Suppose I deprive another of that other person's life, (the life of a person) who likes to live and does not like to die, who desires happiness and dislikes unhappiness, it would not be pleasing and delightful to that other person as well. What is not pleasant and delightful to me is not pleasant and delightful to the other person too. How could I inflict upon another what is not pleasant and delightful to me? Having reflected in this manner one refrains from killing, and speaks in praise of refraining from killing, and encourages others too to refrain from killing.*

The Buddha advised his noble lay disciples to extend the same kind of moral reasoning in order to practice restraint regarding other unethical actions such as stealing, adultery, false speech, malicious speech, harsh speech and vain or frivolous talk. This is clearly an instance in Buddhism in which what is generally conceived as the Golden Rule of Morality of not doing unto others what one does not want others to do unto oneself is enunciated.

## **Conclusion**

In the above discussion we have pointed out that there is no Buddhist term that exactly corresponds to the English term 'right' when used in the sense of a claim. There is no doubt that this term can be used attaching to it an ethical value. The Judeo-Christian dogma that only human beings have eternal souls and hence only they are entitled to rights has to a large extent hindered the extension of the moral concern implicit in the notion of a right to sentient beings other than human. The Buddhist ethical term *dhamma* is much more inclusive and brings within its compass all sentient beings capable of feeling pleasure and pain contented and discontented, happy and miserable. Buddhism takes care of the moral value attributable to the notion of a right by delineating the boundaries of behaviour that is in accordance with *dhamma*. Behaviour in accordance with *dhamma* brings within its fold much more than the so-called concern with human rights and promotes a more comprehensive sense of human morality and ethics. The Buddha's teaching cannot agree with the Kantian principle that only humans could be treated as ends in themselves. From this however, it does not follow that Buddhism does not recognize the greater value of being human. In fact, we have seen in the above discussion that the Buddha's teaching attached greater value to human life than even to the life of the so called divine. The real worth of a human being consists primarily in the ability of a human being to ascend to the level of a sense of human understanding and morality that could culminate in deep insight into the nature of life, resulting in the expression of boundless compassion towards the entire sentient universe.

## References

- Aṅguttaranikāya Part I (ed.), (1961), London: Richard Morris PTS
- Aṅguttaranikāya Part II (ed.), (1976), London: Richard Morris PTS
- Dhammapada, (1985), Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society
- Dīghanikāya Vol. I (1940), in T.W. Rhys Davids & J. E. Carpenter (eds.), London: Pali Text Society
- Dīghanikāya Vol. II (1966), in T.W. Rhys Davids & J. E. Carpenter (eds.), London: Pali Text Society
- Dīghanikāya Vol. III, (1976), in J.E. Carpenter (ed.), London: Pali Text Society
- Gross, Rita M. (1992) *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, New York: State University of New York Press
- Itivuttaka (1975), in Ernst Windisch (ed.), London: Pali Text Society
- Jātaka (1963), in V. Fousboll (ed.), London: Pali Text Society
- Jayatilleke, K.N. (1967) 'The Principles of International Law in Buddhist Doctrine', *Receuil Des Cours*, Vol. 120, 441-567
- Jayatilleke, K.N. (1989) *Dhamma, Man and Law*, Singapore: The Buddhist Research Society
- Keown, Damien (1995) 'Are there "Human Rights" in Buddhism?' *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, Vol. II: 3-27
- Majjhimanikāya Vol. I (1979), in V. Trenckner (ed.), London: Pali Text Society
- Majjhimanikāya Vol. II (1960), Lord Chalmers (ed.), London: Pali Text Society
- Perera, L.P.N. (1991) *Buddhism and Human Rights*, Colombo: Karunaratne and Sons
- Samyuttanikāya Part I (1960), in M. Leon Feer (ed.), London: Pali Text Society
- Samyuttanikāya Part V (1960), in M. Leon Feer (ed.), London: Pali Text Society
- Suttanipāta (1913), in D. Anderson & H. Smith (eds.), London: Oxford University Press
- Theragāthā (1966), in Hermann Oldenberg & Richard Pischel (eds.), London: Pali Text Society