

# ELEMENTS OF BUDDHA'S POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY IN THE PALI CANON, AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR THE GLOBAL LEADERSHIP ISSUES AND SUSTAINABLE POLITICAL RELATIONS

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## ABSTRACT

*The presentation will be dedicated to showing that the Buddha's teaching contained in the Pali Canon delivers some important observations about the ways of proper government and political engagement. Those elements can be divided into two groups:*

*1. Explicit teachings on social and political relations and right leadership. In this category we'll find a very clear message advocating for values- and rules-based order in which a ruler should lead by example of upholding high standards (charisma) and not by force. War and employing power pressures in general are shown not only as morally wrong, but as ultimately futile, leading to the downfall of the one resorting to them.*

*2. Implicit teachings, are universal Buddhist assumptions with bearing on the political issues. One must begin with the concept of "sentient beings" which escapes the pitfalls of narrow-minded nationalism that seeks one's superiority in one's nation seen as inherently superior to any other, and extends the area of human concern far beyond the human realm into the world of nature. From this perspective Buddhism rejects*

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*all claims concerning superiority and all social stratification based on birth, nationhood or generally, power. The only stratification Buddhism upholds is based on the positive personal accomplishments – on virtues. All of this point to the ideal in international relations where very powerful and relatively weak countries are relating as equals by following a common set of agreed rules (“level playing field”). Other such teachings of a general nature (e.g. the importance of transparency and truth for any relation on any level) will be discussed in the full paper.*

*It needs stressing that, far from being an unachievable dream of an idealist, the elements of the aforementioned teachings are being implemented in various organisations in contemporary world (such as EU or UN). At the same time we see very recent developments in international politics that go directly opposite to that vision. It is not sure which one of them (if any) will win in the long run, but the Buddhist view certainly is the proposition that delivers more stable and predictable future where nations discuss their goals based on rules set together with other nations seen in principle as equal partners and not as enemies.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the Pali Canon, one can find clear indications as to the Buddha’s view concerning worldly matters that in today’s terms might be described as politics, civil administration, international relations and conflict. Obviously those matters do not constitute the center of the Buddha’s teachings, but neither do they feel out of place because the teachings concerning politics are deeply integrated with the fundamental aspects of the Dhamma. So it is not at all surprising that the rules for growth that the Buddha presented to the Vajji confederacy are very similar (in some points identical) to those given to the Saṅgha.

The paper will be divided into three parts:

- i. Explicit teachings on social and political relations and right leadership in the Pali Canon.
- ii. Implicit teachings, concerning universal Buddhist assumptions with bearing on the political issues.
- iii. Some concise remarks about the value of the Buddha’s view for the present.

## 2. SOCIAL AND POLITICAL THOUGHT IN THE PALI CANON

During the Buddha's time there were two main competing forms of state organizations on the Gangetic Plain. The first was kingdom whose defining characteristic was the institution of a consecrated monarch, who got that status based on hereditary rights. The most important (powerful) kingdoms mentioned in the Nikāyas are Magadha ruled by Bimbisāra and later by his son Ajātasattu, with the capital in Rājagaha and then Pāṭaliputta, Kosala, ruled by Pasenadi and his son Viḍuḍabha with the capital in Sāvattihī, Vamsa ruled by Udena with the capital in Kosambī, and Avantī with the capital in Ujjenī, ruled by king Pajjota.

The second form of government – *gaṇa-saṅgha* – is not as easy to translate. It is frequently described as a republic, oligarchy or chiefdom (Thapar 2003, p. 147 ff.). It contained some participative elements, such as meetings, discussions and voting, but those were reserved to the representatives of the ruling clan, or clans – in the case of a chiefdom-confederacy. Even smaller number of people dealt with a day-to-day administration. The term *rājā* was also used in *gaṇa-saṅghas*, but its meaning was different from the usage in kingdoms. It could be applied to any clan member with the power to discuss or vote on the state affairs, but more specifically it described the select few (*gaṇarājās*) who decides on matters concerning foreign policy, war and administrative matters (Barua 2003, p. 297). A *gaṇa-saṅgha* could consist of a single clan (Sākyas, Mallās, Koliyas) or a confederate group of clans. The prime example of the latter is the Vajji confederacy, consisting of eight or nine clans (Barua 2003, p. 294 ff., Thapar 2003, p. 138). Those political entities, no matter the political organization were constantly competing for power. Sometimes this competition took form of a military conflict.

The Buddha himself was born in a *gaṇa-saṅgha* state of the Sākyas, and clearly had sympathy for this form of government. He perceived it as a more sustainable polity in the long run, but at the same time he was undoubtedly aware of its fragility as the following story about the coming conflict between the Vajjis and the kingdom of Magadha illustrates.

The story is part of the narrative of the Mahāparinibbānasutta (DN 16) but it is also an independent story in AN 7.22 (Bodhi 2012, p. 1010 ff.). King Ajātasattu of Magadha wants to attack and conquer the Vajji confederacy. He declares “As powerful and mighty as these Vajjis are, I will annihilate them, destroy them, bring calamity and disaster upon them.” (Bodhi 2012, p. 1010). He sends his minister Vassakāra (“Rainmaker”) to the Buddha to inquire about his prediction concerning this plan “for Tathāgatas do not speak falsely” (Bodhi 2012, p. 1011). The Buddha’s response is to enumerate seven activities in the Vajji confederacy, by upholding of which only growth might be expected for them, not decline. These are: (1) assembling often and holding frequent assemblies, (2) assembling in harmony, adjourning their meetings in harmony, and conducting the affairs of the Vajjis in harmony, (3) not decreeing anything that has not been decreed and not abolishing anything that has already been decreed, but undertaking and following the ancient Vajji principles as they have been decreed, (4) honoring, respecting, esteeming, and venerating the Vajji elders, (5) not abducting women and girls from their families and force them to live with the Vajjians, (6) honoring, respecting, esteeming, and venerating the traditional shrines, both those within [the city] and those outside, and not neglecting the righteous oblations as given and done to them in the past, (7) providing righteous protection, shelter, and guard for arahants, [with the intention]: “How can those arahants who have not yet come here come to our realm, and how can those arahants who have already come dwell at ease here” (see: Bodhi 2012, pp. 1011–12)<sup>(1)</sup>.

All those activities point to a system that is based on compromise, strongly conservative in nature, looking for guidance about the present affairs in the past experience (the elders) and resolutions (“ancient Vajji principles as they have been decreed”), and protecting those who need and deserve protection. The Buddha informs Vassakāra, that it was he, who taught the Vajjis those seven principles. Vassakāra replies: “If, Master Gotama, the Vajjis were to observe even one among these principles of non-decline, only growth would be expected for them, not decline. What can be said if they observe all seven? King Ajātasattu Vedehiputta of Magadha,

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1. For Alternative translations see: Gethin (2008, pp. 38–41), Walshe (1995, pp. 231–32).

Master Gotama, cannot take the Vajjis by war, except through treachery or internal dissension” (Bodhi 2012, p. 1013).

Vassakāra indeed succeeded by diplomacy (*upalāpana*) and sowing disunion (*mithubheda*) as we are informed. Faking quarrel with king Ajātasattu over his supposed sympathy for the Vajjis, he flees Magadha to the Vajjian territory, and within three years is able to totally break the union of the confederacy. Buddha's rules are forgotten and Ajātasattu scores an easy victory (see: Malalasekera 1938a, p. 846).

The Buddha certainly did not approve of military solutions to conflicts. Wars are rarely justifiable (except perhaps for defensive engagements); they lead to the suffering of many and hardly ever solve anything. The story of the conflict over the village of Kāsi between king Pasenadi and Ajātasattu illustrates that. Pasenadi married his sister to king Bimbisāra, Ajātasattu's father, and gave her the village as part of the dowry. When Ajātasattu killed his father, and his mother died of grief, Pasenadi reclaimed Kāsi, arguing that patricide does not have right to the inheritance. Ajātasattu waged war against his uncle and defeated him in battle. The Buddha commented that as follows: “Bhikkhus, King Ajātasattu of Magadha has evil friends, evil companions, evil comrades. King Pasenadi of Kosala has good friends, good companions, good comrades. Yet for this day, bhikkhus, King Pasenadi, having been defeated, will sleep badly tonight” (SN 3.14, Bodhi 2000, p. 177). The fortunes in war, however, often change and king Pasenadi ultimately defeated king Ajātasattu confiscated his army and held him prisoner. The Buddha responded in verse: “[...] The fool thinks fortune is on his side / So long as his evil does not ripen, / But when the evil ripens / The fool incurs suffering. [...]” (SN 3.15, Bodhi 2000, p. 178). Later, supposedly after Ajātasattu renounced his claim to the throne, Pasenadi released him, gave him his daughter Vajirā as a wife, and presented as a wedding gift with the same village of Kāsi (Malalasekera 1938a, pp. 171–72). It cannot escape one's notice that war was hardly justifiable course of action, especially given the end result, but there are also deeper reflections to be made. One is the contrasting behavior of the two kings – Pasenadi and Ajātasattu. It might be compared to the conflict between devas, representing the

former and asuras similar to the latter. As Bhikkhu Bodhi remarks in his introduction to the *Samyutta Nikāya*: “*In Buddhist legend the Tāvatiṃsa devas are perpetually being attacked by the asuras, the titans, beings of great physical prowess and violent ambition who seek to conquer them and take control of their domain. The Sakkasamyutta repeatedly pits Sakka in struggle against the leaders of the asuras, Vepacitti and Verocana. The two sides can be read as symbolizing alternative political philosophies. The asura leaders favor rule by force and retaliation against enemies; they rationalize aggression and extol the ethic of “might makes right.” Sakka, in contrast, stands for rule by righteousness, patience towards aggressors, and the compassionate treatment of wrongdoers*” (Bodhi 2000, pp. 86–87).

The second observation is that war is ultimately futile as it settles nothing by itself. It is very interesting, that the remarks about war in the *Nikāyas* are very similar to remarks about gambling, because they are both very uncertain affairs as to the immediate results, and secondly, on the deeper level both leave one exposed, irrespectively of the result. Let us compare the description of the dangers of gambling from the *Sigālovāda sutta* (DN 31) with the aforementioned sutta concerning the conflict between Pasenadi and Ajātasattu:

[...] being devoted to the recklessness of gambling is a way of losing one’s belongings; [...] ‘Young householder, there are these six dangers in being devoted to the recklessness of gambling: **if one wins one engenders hatred, if one loses one bemoans the things lost**, one’s wealth diminishes, one’s word has no authority in an assembly, one is despised by one’s friends and companions, one is not considered a desirable marriage partner, since the gambling man does not have the means to support a wife. (Gethin 2008, pp. 131–32)

**Victory breeds enmity, / The defeated one sleeps badly.**  
/ The peaceful one sleeps at ease, / Having abandoned  
victory and defeat.<sup>(2)</sup> (SN 3.14, Bodhi 2000, p. 177).

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2. *jayaṃ veraṃ pasavati, dukkhaṃ seti parājito. / upasanto sukhaṃ seti, hitvā jayaparā-jayaṃ.* The same verse is to be found in *Dhammapada* 201 (see e.g. Bhikkhu Thanissaro 1997, p. 77, *Buddharakkhita* 1985, p. 37).

So the ultimate Buddhist observation is that war itself is not the method to resolve conflicts but to perpetuate it. The greater aggression and oppression, the greater opposition and counter-aggression: “*The killer begets a killer, / One who conquers, a conqueror. / The abuser begets abuse, / The reviler, one who reviles. / Thus by the unfolding of kamma / The plunderer is plundered*”. (SN 3.15, Bodhi 2000, p. 178)

The Buddha accepted the existence of different forms of government, and the questionable practices those governments engaged in, as a reality of his times. This, however, never precluded him from teaching about the more perfect form of polity, and the ultimate goal to which it should lead. To put it simply, the Buddha wanted a government in whatever form, to serve its purpose (maintaining order and protecting the people) and be guided by virtue (Dhamma). In order to illustrate this, let us turn first to the Aggañña sutta, and then to Mahāsudassana sutta, which describes the ideal of ruler – a *cakkavattin*.

The Aggañña sutta (DN 27) is a text very rich in content that describes – among other things – the origin of the present world, of the society with its stratification into four classes (*vaṇṇa*), and of the institution of kingship, what is the most important for the present discussion. The setting for the story is the dissolution of this world-system, in consequence of which most beings are reborn in the Ābhassara (“Radiant”) realm.

*There they exist made of mind, feeding on joy, self-luminous, moving through the air, always beautiful. They remain like this for a long, long time. Then there comes a time, [...] when, at some point, after a long period of time this world evolves. When the world evolves beings for the most part fall from the realm of the Radiant and come here to this world; and they exist made of mind, feeding on joy, self-luminous, moving through the air, always beautiful. They remain like this for a long, long time.* (Gethin 2008, p. 120)

The story depicts a perfected state of existence, where beings are self-sufficient, and there are no distinctions between them – there are no male and female, beings are counted only as beings. This perfected state soon starts to deteriorate. The essence

of earth formed as the skin on boiling milk, and one being of greedy disposition became curious, tasted it and was overcome by craving (*taṇhā*). From then, craving intensified, more things appeared, beings became coarser, and their differentiation became apparent. Finally male and female appeared, and with them sexual intercourse. Later still rice appeared, ready to eat, without bran or husk. Whenever beings collected rice for the evening meal, it was grown and ripe again by the time of the morning meal. Then one being of lazy disposition, decided to collect enough rice for two meals. Others followed his example and food-storing was invented. As a consequence of that, rice grew with husk and bran, and what was cut did not grow back again. Faced with the perspective of food shortages, beings decided to divide the fields into personal plots, and ownership and possession was invented. But then one being of greedy disposition, while keeping his plot, decided to take the rice belonging to another.

From then on taking what is not given, chastising, lying, and punishment became known.

*“Then those beings gathered together, lamenting, “Alas, bad practices have appeared among beings, for certainly where taking what is not given becomes known, chastising, lying, and punishment will also become known. **Suppose we were to agree on one being:** he could accuse whoever deserved to be accused for us, he could reprimand whoever deserved to be reprimanded, he could banish whoever deserved to be banished, while we would hand over a share of rice to him”.*

*“Then those beings approached **the most handsome, best-looking, most graceful and most commanding being among them** and said to him, “Come, good being, accuse whoever deserves to be accused, reprimand whoever deserves to be reprimanded, banish whoever deserves to be banished, while we will hand over a share of rice to you.” And having agreed to their request, that being accused whoever deserved to be accused, reprimanded whoever deserved to be reprimanded, banished whoever deserved to be banished, while they handed over a share of rice to him. (Gethin 2008, p. 125).*

As is clear, the story envisages the social contract between the rulers and the subjects. In this vision both the king, and the subjects have rights and also duties. The king is elected based on his personal

qualities (charisma, accomplishments), for the purpose of serving those who elected him, but there is no essential difference between him and the other beings. In other words, the differences in social class, position or power are superficial and have no foundation in essential differences among beings, contrary to the Brahmins' claims. The following fragment from Aggañña illustrates this clearly: [...] "*Mahāsammata*" means "agreed on by all people (*mahājana-sammata*)"; it was "Agreed Great" that was the first expression that appeared. "Ruler (*khattiya*)" means "lord of the fields (*khettānaṃ pati*)"; it was Ruler that was the second expression that appeared. "King (*rājan*)" means "he pleases (*rañjeti*) others by his truth"; it was "King" that was the third expression that appeared. In this way, [...] in accordance with the ancient original expression, the circle of Rulers came into being—made up of those very same beings, not other beings, of beings who were just like them, not different in kind, in accordance with good practice, not bad practice. For Truth is best in the world, both here and now and for the future". (Gethin 2008, p. 125)

The passage just cited illustrates one more important fact. The ultimate function of a king is to follow and act according to the moral guidance – the Truth or Righteousness (here: *dhamma*). This association of kingly power and Dhamma finds elaboration in the concept of the universal ruler, the "one turning the will" – *cakkavattin*.<sup>(3)</sup> In many respects, the *cakkavattin* is described very similarly to the Buddha. Both have the 32 marks of a great man (*mahāpurisa*), both are unique in the world (there can be no other at the same time), their funeral rites must be conducted in the same way, etc. (Gokhale 1969, p. 737) The reason for this similarity is that both have Dhamma as their guide. Of course the Buddha realized it perfectly and *cakkavattin* only to some extent given mundane nature of his activity, but nonetheless he is called *dhammiko dhammarāja*, a "righteous king who rules by the Dhamma".

"*Bhikkhus, even a wheel-turning monarch, a righteous king who rules by the Dhamma, does not turn the wheel without a king above him.*" When this was said, a certain *bhikkhu* said to the Blessed One:

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3. or elaboration on the subject of *cakkavattin* and its place in the Buddhist political thought see e.g. Gokhale (1969).

*“But, Bhante, who could be the king above a wheel-turning monarch, a righteous king who rules by the Dhamma?” “It is the Dhamma, bhikkhu,” the Blessed One said. (AN 5.133, Bodhi 2012, p. 746)*

We see this Dhammic characteristic of *cakkavattin* in the description of his conquest. Following the wheel-treasure (the mark of his righteous rule), king Mahāsudassana marches with his fourfold army first to the East and then to other directions. Everywhere he is greeted with joy by the local rulers, who readily accept his supremacy and ask for his instruction. Mahāsudassana gives them the moral guidance in the form of the five precepts and allows them to stay in power:

*King Mahāsudassana said: “Do not kill living beings. Do not take what is not given. Do not indulge in sexual misconduct. Do not tell lies. Do not drink intoxicants. Govern as you have governed.” And so the rival princes in the east became obedient to King Mahāsudassa (DN 17, Gethin 2008, p. 101).*

It is a stark difference to the political art, as it is usually understood, where ends usually justify the means, and ethics is not something that worry rulers too much. In the Nikāyas one can find several terms describing the science of statesmanship, usually in a pejorative context. There is *khattadhamma* or *khattavijjā* (“science of rulers”), *daṇḍanīti*, and *nītisattha*. It is described as *tiracchāna vijjā* – a low art, a pseudo-science, and wrong occupation – *micchājīva* (Goyal 2002, p. 129, Rhys Davids and Stede 1972, p. 303). The PTS dictionary gives us a description of *khattavijjavādin*, “one who engages in the science of rulers”: “even at the expense of killing father and mother is wealth to be desired for oneself” (Rhys Davids and Stede 1972, p. 232). It need not be repeated, that this is a description fitting precisely to the case of king Ajātasattu.

The Buddha did not approve of this and set another ideal for the ultimate purpose of the existence of king and state in the model of the *cakkavattin*. What is described here, in the story of Mahāsudassana, is a moral conquest, where a just ruler conquers hearts and minds of the people, who become his subjects willingly and eagerly. Ultimately, in the developed political theory in the Nikāyas, the function of the state is to protect and implement Dhamma. This

ideal, which reached down to the smallest settlements through the local monastery, undoubtedly kept in check the more extravagant and morally questionable activities of a ruler. In this sense Buddhism and Buddhist Saṅgha served as a subtle spiritual counterbalance to the military, political and economic power of the state (Gokhale 1969, p. 738). However, it is impossible for the division between political and spiritual, *āṇā* and *dhamma* to be ultimately bridged, and the Buddha concentrated his efforts on establishing the Saṅgha for the purpose of creating perfect micro-society and perfect model to imitate by the society at large (Nakamura 1999, p. 88).

The main function of the Saṅgha is to provide a fertile spiritual environment (or “field” – *khetta*) for successful practice towards awakening. But the Saṅgha has also other, indirect functions for the wider society. The Buddha always consciously rejected attempts to steer the Saṅgha into the direction of Indian forest ascetics and to sever its relation with society. Precisely that was the attempt of Devadatta with the intention of causing the schism in the Saṅgha. Devadatta demanded that five rules be made compulsory for all monks and nuns:

*(1) that monks should dwell all their lives in the forest, (2) that they should accept no invitations to meals, but live entirely on alms obtained by begging, (3) that they should wear only robes made of discarded rags and accept no robes from the laity, (4) that they should dwell at the foot of a tree and not under a roof, (5) that they should abstain completely from fish and flesh. The Buddha's reply was that those who felt so inclined could follow these rules—except that of sleeping under a tree during the rainy season—but he refused to make the rules obligatory. This refusal delighted Devadatta, who went about with his party, declaring that the Buddha was prone to luxury and abundance (Malalasekera 1938b, p. 1109).*

The reasons for the Buddha's refusal, however, are quite clear. He imagined the Saṅgha, and the society that hosted it, in reciprocal relation – both giving, and receiving something in exchange. The lay society provided the Saṅgha with food, medicine, clothes, shelter, etc. The Saṅgha for its part, provided laity with teachings about how to lead a fulfilled, morally grounded life, as well as how to secure a good form of afterlife. But it was also something more.

The Saṅgha was meant to be an exemplar or micro-model of the ideal society.

Many of its features show the attempt to “turn back the clock”, so to speak, to restore things to a better state, described by the Aggañña sutta. In the times before the necessity of electing the king, there was no food storing, no need for cooking, no private possession, no punishment by force, etc. When we look to the vinaya, the similarities are striking. Monks and nuns must go about with minimal possessions, evenly distributed, so there are no inequalities, they do not store the food (except for a limited period during sickness), do not cook, their stature is based on a personal charisma associated with accomplishments on the path. Saṅgha exhibits also strict internal and external pacifism. There are no corporal punishments and no forced punishments – the punitive procedure is set in motion by the Saṅgha only after a monk’s or nun’s acknowledgement of the fault and a formal confession. Of course it might be said that the Saṅgha cannot serve as a model for a general society, because it depends on that very society for the production of material things (food, clothes, etc.)<sup>(4)</sup>, and needs constant right exertion by right minded, select individuals oriented on the spiritual. Perhaps it is true, but it doesn’t mean, that the Saṅgha cannot serve as an inspiration for steering society and polity. And one of the points touches precisely on the role of individuals. The society can only be as good, as its members. The positive social and political change must start with the right exertion and positive self-change of individuals.

The second lesson concerns the organizational aspect of the Saṅgha, which in an important aspect is similar to the organization of a *gaṇa-saṅgha*. Let us revisit seven rules of non-decline, this time given to the Buddhist monks:

(1) “As long as the bhikkhus assemble often and hold frequent assemblies, [...]” (2) “As long as the bhikkhus assemble in harmony, adjourn in harmony, and conduct the affairs of the Saṅgha in harmony, [...]” (3) “As long as the bhikkhus do not decree anything that has not

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4. Although later Buddhism reflected on this issue, and monasteries engaged in e.g. food-production.

*been decreed or abolish anything that has already been decreed, but undertake and follow the training rules as they have been decreed, [...]* (4) *“As long as the bhikkhus honor, respect, esteem, and venerate those bhikkhus who are elders, of long standing, long gone forth, fathers and guides of the Saṅgha, and think they should be heeded, [...]* (5) *“As long as the bhikkhus do not come under the control of arisen craving that leads to renewed existence, [...]* (6) *“As long as the bhikkhus are intent on forest lodgings, [...]* (7) *“As long as the bhikkhus each individually establish mindfulness [with the intention]: ‘How can well-behaved fellow monks who have not yet come here come, and how can well-behaved fellow monks who are already here dwell at ease?’ only growth is to be expected for them, not decline (AN 7.23, Bodhi 2012, pp. 1013–1014).*

We might note, that these rules are very similar to the ones given to the Vajjis; the first three are in fact identical. The *gaṇa-saṅgha* form of social and political organization, with frequent assemblies, discussions and voting, is also an important lesson for the structuring of general society as well as international relations. As we have seen in the case of the Vajjis, an enemy intent on destroying this form of polity can well succeed, but the important lesson here is that – while not immune to danger – a form of a polity in which its members actively participate, generally has more sustainable characteristics<sup>(5)</sup>. We might mention the feeling of identification with, and responsibility for the society and polity by actively participating in their makings, reduced risk of being dependent on one person’s catastrophic social or political mistake, and a general approach of negotiating differences on the open forum by discussion, instead of secret scheming and military activity – what might be an important lesson for international relations.

### 3. GENERAL BUDDHIST TEACHINGS WITH BEARING ON THE POLITICAL ISSUES

The rest of the present discussion will be necessarily brief, due to space constraints. The most important thing to note is that political

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5. A similar observation can be made by comparing a closed-source, propriety software with its open-source counterparts (e.g. in case of security applications). The bugs and security risks in the latter are usually spotted and patched much faster, thanks to the communal work.

ideas in the Nikāyas are tightly integrated with the more general teachings. Some that will be discussed here are the observation of a fundamental commonality of all human beings and in fact of all living, sentient beings (*satta*) connected with the universal experience of *saṅsāra*-generated suffering, the awareness of deeply interrelated nature of reality, and the role of truth.

Nothing summarizes more concisely the commonality of sentient beings, than these verses from Dhammapada:

*All tremble at violence; all fear death. Putting oneself in the place of another, one should not kill nor cause another to kill.*

*All tremble at violence; life is dear to all. Putting oneself in the place of another, one should not kill nor cause another to kill* (DhP 129-130, Buddharakkhita 1985, p. 30).

Although there are words in pāli for a human person (*purisa*, *puggala*), the preferred term is rather the general “sentient (living) being” – *satta*, as in the above quotation. Such choice underscores the fact that all human beings are fundamentally the same, sharing the same aspirations, hardships and fears. The term *satta*, also logically require to extend the area of human concern far beyond the human realm into the world of nature. On the political level, the category of “sentient beings” provides the tool to escape the pitfalls of narrow-minded nationalism, where one seeks the confirmation of one’s nation’s superiority by hatred and denigration directed to other nations. From this perspective Buddhism rejects all claims concerning inherent superiority based on national claims, and all social stratification connected with birth, wealth, formal education or, generally, power. The only stratification Buddhism upholds is based on the positive personal accomplishments – on virtues.

The idea of the fellowship of all beings with their struggle in *saṅsāra* finds a natural application in the practice of the four abodes of Brahma (*brahmavihāra*), also called the “immeasurable” meditation, where one pervades the whole world with the mind imbued with loving-kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), altruistic joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*) (See e.g. AN 4.190, Bodhi 2012, p. 560). Loving-kindness is beautifully described in verse in the *Mettā* sutta of Suttanipāta:

[...] *May beings all live happily and safe, / and may their hearts rejoice within themselves. / Whatever there may be with breath of life, / whether they be frail or very strong, / without exception, be they long or short, / or middle-sized, or be big or small, / or dense, or visible or invisible, / or whether they dwell far or they dwell near, / those that are here, those seeking to exist— / may beings all rejoice with themselves* (Sn 145–147, Laurence Khantipalo Mills 2015, p. 48).

The other, most important teaching connected with the notion of commonality of all sentient beings is *paṭicca samuppāda*, the teaching on dependent origination. It is usually presented as a twelve-factored list describing the elements responsible for renewal of existence, but here we are interested in its abstract form:

*When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases* (SN 12.37, Bodhi 2000, p. 575).

The implications of this notion are very profound for the Buddhist teaching, and impossible to exhaust here. In the social and political dimension it means that we are all interconnected and interdependent. It applies not only for the realm of sentient beings (*sattaloka*), but also to the receptacle world (environment for beings – *bhājanaloka*). It means not only that we should treat one another (be it individuals, firms or nations) as partners, we have no other choice, given the state of affairs. This interconnectedness of the world is clearly visible and a necessity today, for example in environmental, demographic or economic phenomena.

But partners need to trust one another. Here we come to the right speech (*sammāvācā*). The prime aspect of the right speech is to speak the truth, that is to state that which is in agreement with objective reality and one's actions and intentions. There are also three other aspects of the right speech: refraining from harsh speech by which one's partners are antagonized, refraining from divisive speech by which one causes quarrels and divisions, and refraining from idle or nonsubstantial speech. Whether we talk about individuals or nations, there can be no trust, no common endeavors and no mutual respect (only the appearance of them) when there is no proper form of communication.

#### 4. VALUE OF THE BUDDHIST TEACHINGS FOR SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ISSUES IN CONTEMPORARY WORLD

Let us briefly summarize some tenets concerning Buddhist teaching about social and political dimensions of human activity. As concerns the individual, Buddhism stresses the need for self-development, and moral grounding of human and trans-human interactions, based on the perception of commonality and interdependence of sentient beings. In the social dimension, the individuals should show active, participative attitude. Their relations should be built on trust and respect for others, by the means of the truth.

As for the state and other trans-individual actors, the Nikāyas remind that they have responsibilities for their members. The social differences of wealth, education, status, or access to healthcare should be minimized as much as possible. This lesson comes from the organization of the Buddhist Saṅgha, as well as from the Aggañña sutta, where in the perfected state, beings were only counted as beings, without difference, prejudice or inequality. Also in the functioning of the Saṅgha we can find lessons that a transparent organization, based on truth, frequent assemblies, compromise, negotiation, and discussion, is to be sought for. There is also a strong thesis that war (or more generally – conflict) ultimately never solves anything<sup>(6)</sup>. The other lessons are as those for an individual. There must be a moral fundament for acting, intertwined with an awareness of commonality and interdependence of all actors.

It needs stressing that, far from being an unachievable dream of an idealist, the elements of the aforementioned teachings were and are being implemented in various organizations in contemporary world. In Europe, after two cataclysmic world-wars, there was longing for a long lasting peace. The European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) was an initiative by Robert Schuman to centrally regulate the production of said assets in six European countries. The main goal of the project, beside the economic advantages, was to tightly

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6. I would see the exception to this in a purely defensive war, where a country must defend the lives of its people from an unprovoked attack. Even then, however, to permanently end the conflict, other, non-military means are necessary.

integrate traditionally rival countries in order to make war “not merely unthinkable but materially impossible” (Anonymous 2016). The idea proved successful and gave way to the formation of European Union (EU). As an organization that have to negotiate the diverging interests, aspirations and world-views of 28 countries<sup>(7)</sup>, the EU has no other option than to be a rules-based, open and transparent political body – in consequence the EU sets a stage on which very powerful and relatively weak countries are relating as equals by following a common set of agreed rules (“level playing field”). The EU also proves that a trans-national political body (not unlike a *gaṇa-saṅgha*) can become quite powerful, however in this case not by the military might, but by the institutional and economic strength<sup>(8)</sup>.

They were, and are, other organizations, that exhibit qualities mirroring teachings in the Nikāyas. The organizations that may serve as an example are the League of Nations and its successor, the United Nations with the sub-bodies. Their role was to provide a negotiation forum for conflict resolution, and by that to facilitate international peace and cooperation. The results may be described as mixed, but generally positive. It is certainly a contemporary phenomenon, that the method of political and economic pressure, or a hybrid war is preferred over the open military conflict. When it comes to war it is rarely a war over territorial expansion – a standard form of military conflict in the past. It appears that Buddhist observations concerning war, are finally being realized by the contemporary societies<sup>(9)</sup>.

The future will be defined by the ever growing need for the realization of our commonality and interdependence on both an individual and trans-individual level. The growing number of

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7. Likely soon to become 27, because of the Brexit. It shows that the EU is an institution not without its own profound problems. For the future challenges for the EU see (Barnier 2019).

8. The global impact of EU laws is a well-known phenomenon, where the EU regulation are mirrored in non-EU countries. A recent example is the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

9. A point in case concerning the futility of war is the partitioning of Poland by its neighbours. In consequence the commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania disappeared from the maps for 123 years. Yet both Poland and Lithuania reappeared as states, because even so thorough a conquest could not eradicate their cultural (linguistic, historical, religious, etc.) identity.

people on the planet, and ever deeply integrating markets, together with the ecological challenges make it an inevitability. We are, or soon will be faced with the issues of mass migration, workforce transfer and outsourcing, building a sustainable framework for multinational companies, providing living space, food and water in sufficient quantities and of sufficient quality, climate change, pollution, emission, etc. Those problems are global in nature, and need to be addressed with the affirmative attitude of the Buddhist notion of the community of sentient beings. On the political level it requires a common set of universally applicable rules made for the benefit of all beings and the environment. It deserves to be noted that this is not incompatible with the appreciation and affirmation of one's own country, as the case of the EU illustrates. On the individual level it calls for mindful living, with awareness that the way I consume goods, the things I choose to buy, the means of transport I use, and other everyday decisions directly and indirectly affect other beings.

This direction seems inevitable given the state of things, but we have a choice to positively embrace it and help to shape it in the spirit of the Nikāyas, or to oppose it. The globalization is an ongoing process, troubled by profound problems, that usually hit already the most adversely affected social groups. Some seek to oppose it by making the case for isolationist and nationalist ideology. This might be illustrated by the Brexit vote in the UK, "America First" movement in the USA, or the wave of nationalist governments within the EU.

It is not sure which way of addressing the future challenges (if any) will win in the long run. However, the Buddhist view certainly is the proposition that delivers more stable and predictable future where nations discuss their goals based on rules they set together with other nations that are seen in principle as equal partners and not as enemies.

## ABBREVIATIONS

DN: Dīgha Nikāya (references are to the sutta number)

SN: Saṃyutta Nikāya (references are to the saṃyutta and sutta number)

AN: Aṅguttara Nikāya (references are to the nipāta and sutta number)

*sabbe tasanti daṇḍassa, sabbe bhāyanti maccuno.  
attānaṃ upamaṃ katvā, na haneyya na ghātaye.  
sabbe tasanti daṇḍassa, sabbesaṃ jīvitam piyaṃ.  
attānaṃ upamaṃ katvā, na haneyya na ghātaye.*

Dhammapada 129–130

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