

# Democracy and Buddhism

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## Abstract

This paper aims to report on the results of Thailand 45 volumes of Tipitaka study. The objectives of the paper are in two folds: one is to study the government systems existed during the Buddha's Era; another is to study the democracy described in the Buddhism texts.

Concerning the government during the Buddha's era, two types of government had been mentioned: one is the absolute monarchy with one supremacy originated from the King, another one was the oligarchy with the supremacy originated from the group of monarchs by having the attendants of various ranks taking command and functioning according to the group of monarchs' orders.

On studying the government in Buddhism, originated from the Buddha, the word 'democracy' did not exist but the government was called 'Sangha' (company). This has been considered as the monk government form. However the essence of government in terms of doctrine has been focused more than on the form. The essence content includes 1) defining the meaning of democracy in Buddhist way concluded that "democracy government is the government of self-governing people"; 2) the democracy components studied are both forms and essence (functions). 3) The doctrine (Dhamma principles) is to be practiced for the sake of achieving proper democracy.

**Keyword:** Democracy, Buddhism.

## Introduction

Human gathering together in form of what is called society usually contains related and interacted components. Such components are always described in 3 folds: one is human behavior of such society, one is human quality of life in all aspects – political, economic and social, one is social organization and institutions. With three related components, it is necessary to set up possible social system, order and management. Government is one of the issues to make understanding first before go on managing the other social components since government is the power for social administration and management.

According to human history, a government had two foundations: form and function, from which only form has been in focus and interest for developing and changing more than paying attention to function. For this reason, we have now various forms of government, such as monarchy, democracy, oligarchy, autocracy, dictatorship etc. However, its function that is considered as the more important issue in making government perfect is still in question for acquiring the best solution and technique of how to run a government that should enable the social members to lead their lives happily and peacefully. Working on form formation, it is then believed that democracy is the best type of government, and the whole world is now trying to introduce democracy to be practiced worldwide no matter it will be in the form of direct democracy (of which people contribute participation and make decision in establishing government), or representative democracy (of which people utilize power through their elected representatives in establishing government). Any society or country that has its government without being democracy will be rejected and pushed by all means to self-reorganize and innovate to be one of the democracy governments.

## Democracy during the Buddha's Era

From the study and gathering data existed in the Tipitaka (the Pali Canon) of 45 volumes<sup>(2)</sup> in Thai version, the one used in study and practice in Thailand, the government in old times during the Buddha Era, were in two types:

**(1) One monarchy government** which now is called “absolute monarchy” was the government ruled by a king who only had supremacy as the ruler of the country. His successors being the next were from his own royal family. In Tip taka texts, the story of monarchs who were related to Buddhism was told. The famous kings whose names were mentioned and became popular among the Tipitaka learners are various, for example:

1.1 King Bimbisara, the king of Rajagaha City, Magadha Country.

His territory was considered as the largest among countries existed in the Buddha Ear, being the place where the Buddha used its language and location to propagate Buddhism. King Bimbisara was the first person who established the first Buddhist temple and the first person who initiated pouring sacred water ceremony. He was one of the rulers who contributed great support and conserved Buddhism and was the one who attained the Fruition of Stream entry (Sotapattiphala). His country was considered as the Land of Dhamma.

1.2 King Ajatasattu, king Bimbisara's son, who committer patricide to snatch away the throne from his father, was the king first misled by Devadatta's teaching and later converted to be a Buddhist under the Buddha. With Devadatta's provoke to help each other destroying Buddhism and the Buddha, king Ajatasattu seized his father and put him in jail until King Bimbisara was tortured to death. King Ajatasattu, later, repented and took refuge in Buddhism, turned to be a devoted king who took good care of his country and became a great patron of Buddhism. He was considered as one of the most popular and greatest rulers.

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<sup>2</sup> The Tipitaka texts are called “Siamrat” version, and the translated in Thai language “Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalayaversion, are used for the study in this paper.

1.3 King Pasendikosala, the king of Savatthi, Kosala Country. His territory was the second largest to Magadha. King Pasendikosala became a Buddhist by the persuasion of his queen, Queen Mallika who was a Buddhist follower. Before converted to be Buddhist, King Pasendikosala worshiped Nigantha (Jainism) and believed in Brahman sacrifice practice ceremony (killing to be great). After converted to be a Buddhist, it happened that the King himself became very close to the Buddha because he very frequent came to have discourse with the Buddha. His capital city, Savatthi was considered to be the center of Buddhism propagation and was the town where the Buddha stayed for long time.

**(2) Oligarchical monarchy government.** This type of government is run by a group of rulers In the Buddha's Era. The group of rulers was kings of royal families formed in group-rulers. The supremacy belonged to the group not to the people and they inherited the throne by rotating each other among their royal families the country rulers. The oligarchical monarchy was described in Tipitaka as the ones who had relationship with either the Buddha or Buddhism were monarchs as :

2.1 Licchavi kings. This group of kings had Vaishali as the capital of Vajji Country. During the Buddha's Era, Vajji was a very prosperous country among all countries at that time. Licchavi kings oligarchy did not have the only king of supremacy but the supremacy came from various royal families members rotating to act as rulers. The Licchavi king whose name was mentioned in Tipitaka was King Otthaddhalicchavi. He asked to be in audience with the Buddha to ask about the paths of practice to attain enlightenment.<sup>(3)</sup> Vaishali was an important city for Buddhism. The Buddha visited the city many times and usually abode at Kutagara Pavillion, Mahavana Forest of Vaishali. It was the place where the Buddha used to be the place preaching to people and kings from Vaishali and from

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<sup>3</sup> Tipitaka, Translated into Thai version, volumes of extol to Her Majesty the Queen 1996, volume 9. Mahalisutta on Licchavi King named Mahali. p.151

various countries, so many suttas were told from this city. As well, it was the place where Queen Pajagotami and her attendants were ordained and was the place, from the Buddha's last visit, to accept Ambapali, the courtesan's mango garden to be a Buddhist temple.

2.2 Malla King. This type of oligarchy government was run by a group of kings of 16 regions of Malla country. Each region was governed by a king of Malla dynasty. The regions involved to Buddhism consisted of the northern regions having Kusinara as the capital of which the ruler was named "Kosinaraka", and the southern regions having Pava as the capital of which the ruler was named "Paveyyamallaka". Kurnara was the place where the Buddha had the complete Nirvana (extinction of all passions as the great Decease of the Buddha) in the royal garden called "Salavarodayana" (Sal trees forest)

All kings mentioned above were those who worshiped Buddhism and asked for being the Buddha's disciples. After listening to the Buddha's Dhamma, they turned to be good, popular and beloved kings among their people who had also good and happy lives.

### **Democracy and Buddhism**

Since the present world has paid more attention to government in terms of the social order standardization, the best type of government is then the one that leads to have over all social participation. People believe that democracy will be the best type of government so they tend to choose either direct democracy or presidential democracy or parliamentary democracy to fit their own country.

The first, direct democracy, involves the participation of all citizens to vote for government installation (for example Switzerland). The second type, presidential democracy, involves people votes for having all positions in forming government-from president to congress members (for example USA, France). The third type, parliamentary democracy, involves people votes to have representatives from each area or region to form the government

(for example UK, Germany). However, the types of government are not the only significant agenda to concern, but the society has to consider another component of government, that is, the government essence, so it should be finding out the most appropriate one to fit suitably in forming government.

The components of the present world democracy concern mostly on seven features when forming democratic government.

1. Three separation of powers

1.1 Legislative power functioned by parliament usually divided into two chambers-pro and conparties

1.2 Executive power-functioned by cabinets and ministries' administrators.

1.3 Judicative power functioned by courts of justice.

2. Constitution

3. Laws debated and passed by the parliament.

4. Decrees by the government

5. Elections

6. Political parties

7. Referendums

The above mentioned features are the ones every country is trying to operate completely. However one thing among the probable features that is mostly ignored is how to manipulate power in righteous ways, how to write constitution to cover all people's needs and expectation, or how to make and how often to distribute referendums to get righteous decision making etc.

In Buddhism, the focus is mainly on the essence of democracy. The prior discussion concerns how to establish good government. So democracy according to Buddhism <sup>(4)</sup> is defined as “the government of the people that each can establish the self-government”. It has been then, concluded in Buddhism that the possible features of democracy should be

1. Righteous supremacy power

2. Liberty as the best of wisdom

3. Equality in each person's rights and duties

4. Fraternity built up from unity and brotherhood

## Righteous supremacy power

In Buddhism, the definition of power is the one that is dominant influence, supremacy. <sup>(4)</sup> Tipitaka, having the supremacy written in Sutta volumes <sup>(5)</sup> describing the features of supremacy powers as follows.

1. Attadhipateyya is the supremacy of self
2. Lokadhipateyya is the supremacy of the world or public opinions.
3. Dhammadhipateyya – is the supremacy of the Dhamma or righteousness.

On those features, there were no critics on what kind of power is better or worse than each other, but praised the Dhammadhipateyya as the excellent. The reasons were that it was the power that reflected truth, righteousness, reasonable, and widely utilized for public. It is then hinted that if any country would like to find a good democratic government, each citizen has to apply Dhammadhipateyya to conform democracy. For this consideration, each person should have one's own life with Dhamma attainment, giving up all defilements namely craving, conceit, and false theory, but accepting each other's potentiality. These will help everybody live happily and peacefully together.

## Liberty as the base of wisdom

According to Buddhism, liberty means to offer opportunity to expose each other potentiality and capacity in participating to operate the public activities and duties, with harmony management between taking and giving. The true liberty, by Buddhism concept, is to apply each one's incubated wisdom bodily, verbally and mentally to build up peace to the society or to the country. It is not to act or speak whatever one wants.

## Equality in Buddhism

The Buddhism society during the Buddha's times was called 'Sangha' means company. This is considered as the true society of equality because the Sangha consisted of members from all castes who will be treated equally. The regulation or order utilized by the Sangha was seniority system regarding the age of when begins joining the Sangha society. So birth, family background, economic states, education levels are not counted nor

<sup>4</sup> Sutta vol. 11 D. Pa P.274

<sup>5</sup> Sutta vol. 20 Ang. E. P.201

considered. Instead, each one's knowledge, behavior as Arahantship is praised. This can be cited from what the Buddha praised his disciples being excellent in various kinds of knowledge. The Sangha society was then peaceful, respectful, and mutual well accepted.

## Fraternity in Buddhism

It is noticeable that the present society of the world pays less attention to fraternity in democracy. The evidence for this saying can be seen from people take country, race, ethnics, religion independently from each other. The conflicts both internally or externally are everywhere. But in Buddhism, fraternity, being called Samaggi - ekibhava – one unity, means the creation of friendliness, completely performing activities and harmonious standard of living. Besides, fraternity is considered as the related unit for liberty and equality that leads to the real democratic society from which the members live with mutual loving-kindness, friendliness, and harmony.

## Dhamma (Doctrine) for democracy features

According to Buddhism, any society that looks forward to practical democracy, should take attention in finding useful mechanism or techniques to build up people to learn how to achieve self-governing first. To master that kind of characteristic, wisdom-based supremacy power that leads to righteous action must be acquired. His Majesty the king of Thailand, King Bhumibol Adulyadej, had proposed one principle to his people in order that they can apply to use in livelihood called “Philosophical principle of sufficiency economy.”

Such principle consists of 3 cycles 2 conditions – sufficiency, reasonability, immunology that go together with knowledge acquisition and morality practice.

The Dhamma or doctrine for creating suitable democracy features are various depending on context and conditions of citizens or members of such society. The overall picture of the doctrine should be applied to democracy features involves<sup>(6)</sup> “the one who uses supremacy of self should develop mindfulness, the one who has supremacy of the world should

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<sup>6</sup> D. Pa 11/228/231  
Ang. Tika 20/479/186

develop wisdom and consideration, and the one who was supremacy of the Dhamma should develop righteous action; that is, any ruler or leader should develop supremacy of the Dhamma.”

Concerning the above doctrine mentioned the question on how to build up mindfulness to keep the supremacy of self is raised up. In Buddhism, the Satipatthana (Four foundations of mindfulness) are recommended to be practiced from which one of the four foundations can be selected to develop:

1. Kayanupassana – mindfulness as regards the body
2. Vedananupassana – mindfulness as regards feelings
3. Cittanupassana – mindfulness as regards thoughts
4. Dhammanupassana – mindfulness as regards ideas <sup>(7)</sup>

For the question on how to build up wisdom and consideration, it has been suggested from Buddhism to apply three sources:

1. Cintamayapanna – wisdom resulting from reflection
2. Sutamayapanna – wisdom resulting from study
3. Bhavanamayapanna – wisdom resulting from mental development <sup>(8)</sup>

Lastly, concerning how to build up the supremacy of the Dhamma, there are many principles to be used and developed. In this paper the common dhamma principle everyone can apply to attain the supremacy of the Dhamma is “Sangahavatthu” (Four based of sympathy) which consists of:

1. Dana – giving
2. Piyavaca – kindly speech
3. Atthacariya – useful conduct
4. Samanattata – even and equal treatment <sup>(9)</sup>

## Conclusion

Even though the word ‘democracy’ did not appear in any volume of Tipitaka, but the Dhamma and practice principles are in compatible with the present day democracy. The consideration on their concept can be

<sup>7</sup> D.M. 10/273-300/325-351

<sup>8</sup> D. Pa 11/228/231

Vbh. V. 35/804/438

<sup>9</sup> D. Pa 11/140/167: 267/244, Ang. Catukka 21/32/42 : 256/335, Ang. Atth. 23/114/222, Ang. Na. 23/209/377

noticed from the created ‘Sangha’ by the Buddha. That is the true democratic government. Besides, the principles or Dhamma preached by the Buddha are those of aiming to building up what is called democracy. Any government that takes any of those principles to be practiced, the expectation to attain idealistic democracy will become true.

“One learned is better than a thousand fools.”

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