Buddhism and Human Rights: A Broader Perspective Towards Peace

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Abstract

This article examines the conceptual connection between Buddhist philosophy and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), providing a broader intercultural perspective on peace and justice. While Buddhism and the UDHR emerge from different historical and philosophical contexts, Eastern spiritual traditions and Western legal-political frameworks, respectively, this study argues that the two are not inherently incompatible. Rather than adopting the language of rights in a legalistic sense, Buddhism articulates ethical responsibilities grounded in compassion, interdependence, and the alleviation of suffering. Through a critical comparison, the paper demonstrates that core Buddhist principles such as non-harming (ahiṃsā), compassion (karuṇā), loving-kindness (mettā), and the Middle Way closely align with the moral underpinnings of human rights, even if expressed differently.

The analysis further contends that the idea of human rights as innate and universal, central to the UDHR, can be meaningfully interpreted through Buddhist teachings that affirm the intrinsic dignity and potential for enlightenment in all sentient beings. In this way, Buddhism offers a valuable ethical lens to complement and deepen contemporary human rights discourse. The article calls for a more inclusive understanding of human rights that recognises diverse cultural expressions without diminishing the core principles of dignity, equality, and justice. The paper proposes a more holistic and dialogical approach to peacebuilding by integrating Buddhist ethical thought with global human rights frameworks. It concludes that when Buddhist values and human rights principles are used in tandem, they reinforce each other and provide a powerful foundation for promoting structural and inner peace. This synthesis underscores the importance of engaging multiple worldviews in the ongoing effort to protect human dignity and foster global harmony.

Keywords: Human Rights; Buddhism and Human Rights; Peace Studies; Human Rights and Peace

Introduction

On 10 December 1948, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), proclaiming for the first time the inalienable rights to which "all members of the human family" are inherently entitled (United Nations General Assembly [UNGA], 1948, p. 3). Over time, the UDHR has achieved the status of customary international law, obliging States, regardless of political, economic, or cultural differences, to uphold its principles (Donnelly, 2013). Within fifty years, "human rights" has become a global lingua franca, framing norms of dignity, equality, and justice in international discourse (Donnelly, 2013). Despite near-universal ratification, questions persist about the UDHR's practical impact (Morsink, 1999). Numerous States party to the Declaration continue to face credible allegations of rights abuses, ranging from discriminatory legislation to systemic violations of civil and political freedoms (Clapham, 2015). This gap between aspiration and implementation calls into question the UDHR's enforcement mechanisms and the extent to which its Western-rooted conception of rights resonates across diverse cultural traditions (Donnelly, 2013).

Arguments have been made that one of the fundamental problems preventing UDHR's effectiveness lies on the question of its 'universality'. It is widely considered that the origins of human rights, the discourse and its intellectual framework are derived from the 'Judeo-Christian' tradition, which makes their extension to different cultures a rather difficult and misguided endeavour (Baik, 2012). The article rejects the criticism that conventional Human Rights are not universal. The article takes the position of not placing doubt on the universality of the UDHR, but believes that for the UDHR to work at its best, there is a need to explore the concept of 'rights' from various cultures and traditions without undermining the significance of the conventional Human Rights concept in the UDHR. The ongoing human rights violations in various parts of the world from states that have ratified the UDHR prove that there is a pressing need to re-examine or even redefine 'human rights' to provide a holistic view of the concept of 'human rights'. Buddhism is not only a religion but a philosophy and way of life which recognizes all human beings as equal under the law of 'Dharma' (the law of nature) largely actualized through 'Karma'; an intentional act (both from past and present) in which effects of actions determine the future of the actor; principle governing cause and effect (Mitchell & Jacoby,

2013; Shani, 2013). The concept of 'Karma', also known as the law of moral causation, is one of the fundamental principles teaching of Buddhism. There is a natural link between rights and responsibilities and duties based on this idea; thus, Dharma and the concept of Karma are compatible with human rights as both imply rights and responsibilities (Dunne & Wheeler, 1999). The doctrine of Karma stresses that one is responsible for one's actions and how one should treat others to accumulate good Karma reflected in a good life (Ness, 1999).

The article views human rights holistically from a Buddhist perspective by exploring and comparing fundamental Buddhist teachings to the UDHR. The purpose is to seek compatibility based on the belief that, before and apart from the UDHR existing, there are notions of 'rights' embedded in different Buddhist traditions. Understanding how other traditions view the concept of rights may help in realising how the UDHR can be understood more effectively from non-Western traditions. Furthermore, this paper argues that in a modern world where the abandonment of traditional wisdom or knowledge is increasing, it is crucial to recognise and embrace applicable knowledge from cultural traditions rooted in the past. This paper has two objectives: first, to explore the concept of 'rights' in Buddhist traditions, comparing these to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Secondly, to understand how Buddhist teachings can contribute to the resolution of conflicts by finding peaceful solutions for Buddhist societies where human rights violations are common. To do this, the paper will illustrate how the concepts of Buddhism, Human Rights and Peace are greatly intertwined and how they reinforce one another. The papers' main questions are: what is Buddhism's view on 'human rights' and how does it express the notion of 'rights' through its core teaching? And to what extent do Buddhist teachings contribute to the idea of human rights?

Rethinking 'human rights' from a religious perspective

Ongoing human rights violations in various parts of states which have ratified the UDHR induce the need to re-examine or redefine 'human rights'. When discussing human rights discourse, there is a need to explain the way various cultures interpret and conceptualise how the language of rights is used. Just because some cultures are unable to express the language of rights in way that parallels with the Western understanding of rights does not mean that human rights in the particular culture does not exist or is not expressed in a different fashion which can re-interpreted in a manner consistent with international human

rights norms embodied in the UDHR (Meyer, 1992). Religion and religious beliefs are an integral part of cultures and, as such, are a crucial part of the human experience. With this in mind, it stands to reason that exploring how Buddhism as a religion embodies human rights can offer to add to the discussion of human rights and its discourse, which expands the ability to apply its core teachings that can then be used in finding pathways for peace (Donnelly, 2013). There is a pressing need to shed new light on human rights by looking at rights with a less egoistic, self-centred perspective and by adopting a less individualistic perspective. There exists a holistic manner which respects individuals while also embracing the 'relationship' and 'connection' between individual, community and society (Henkin, 1979; Inada, 2017).

Aung San Suu Kyi and the Dalai Lama have demonstrated the powerful connection between human rights and religion. Other prominent figures with strong religious devotion were Mahatma Gandhi, who followed the principle of non-violence (ahimsa) in Hinduism and Martin Luther King, Jr, who defined his involvement in the Civil Rights Movement according to the Christian principle of unconditional, self-sacrificial (Davis & Galligan, 2011). The recent uprisings in Tibet and Myanmar amplified a strong religious influence by involving not only lay persons but monks, nuns and religious groups (Nobel Prize, 1991). These examples provide a rationale to discuss how religious involvement in human rights can be understood and interpreted. It is crucial to include religious understandings as part of the human rights discussion instead of being left aside for private matters, given that in many societies, religion remains a pervasive part of life (Henkin, 1979; Hetherington, 2011; Brackney, 2013).

Another noteworthy point for rethinking human rights from a religious perspective is that religions, particularly Buddhism, emphasise not only 'rights' but also 'responsibilities' as a human being in relation to other human beings or even non-human beings. In 1993, at the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights held in Vienna, His Holiness Dalai Lama gave the following statement on Buddhism and human rights;

"*Our world is becoming smaller and ever more interdependent with the rapid growth in population and increasing contact between people and governments. In this light, it is important to reassess the rights and responsibilities of individuals, peoples and nations in relation to each other and to the planet as a whole"* (Lama, 1998, pp. 37).

Furthermore, the Dalai Lama stated in his lecture, 'Reaching for the same goal from a different path' in New Delhi, India, 2012, that the importance of duties and responsibilities was being overshadowed by the idea of rights, where people overly emphasised rights, which undermined responsibilities. He elaborated further that what made rights and responsibilities inseparable is the fact that one has the responsibility to oppose injustice and by not opposing injustice, one becomes part of injustice itself (His Holiness The 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet, 2012).

Viewing human rights through the lenses of Buddhism

Every Article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, even labour rights to fair wages, leisure and welfare, has been adumbrated, cogently upheld and meaningfully incorporated in an overall view of life and society by the Buddha (Inada, 2017). Despite the unique way Buddhism expresses human rights or the notion of rights, Buddhism can greatly contribute to a constructive discussion on the modern human rights discourse. Buddhism is almost always characterised as being a religion of peace, tolerance, and compassion (Keyes, 2011). The struggle for democracy and human rights, which began in the 1990s led by Aung San Suu Kyi, was characterised by Buddhist non-violence (ahimsa) and loving-kindness (metta). The Dalai Lama's speeches worldwide have never once left behind the Buddhist teachings of compassion. This is the central principle of Buddhist teachings called 'the Four Brahma Viharas', which means abiding and living; those who practice these are said to be abiding or living divinely or nobly. The Four Brahma Viharas; Metta (loving-kindness), Karuna (compassion), Mudita (empathetic joy), and Upekkha (equanimity), not only offer an ethical framework for personal conduct but also suggest a reciprocal understanding of rights; individuals who practice compassion and nonviolence (ahimsa) toward others are also entitled to be treated with respect and dignity (Thepa, 2024). These are the principal teachings of the Buddha concerning one's responsibility towards other sentient beings. Consequently, this implies that if one has such responsibilities for their act or attitude towards others, then they also are entitled to the right to claim such treatment from another party.

Keyes (2011) mentioned that Damien Keown, a prominent scholar of Buddhist ethics, asked whether Buddhism would endorse the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Keown stated that this question is profoundly

related to the overall Buddhist vision of individual and society. It is noteworthy that before making analytical comparisons on the compatibility of Buddhism and human rights, it is vital to clarify how this paper views Buddhism. When referring to Buddhism, this paper aims to shift away from viewing Buddhism from an institutionalised perspective of religion but view Buddhism in its pure form, lying form its core teachings of 'Dharma' (Law of Nature). This was discovered by the Buddha, who originally did not teach Buddhism but instead taught Dharma, the law of nature, a universal law which existed before his time and incarnation. Given this view, Dharma per se has already co-existed with the universe and throughout history of mankind, thus providing it with a universal component. The article will now illustrate how both traditional and contemporary Buddhist teachings are compatible with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

What are the core teachings of Buddhism compared with human rights concept? The Five Precepts

The key components of Buddha's teaching revolved around 'Sila' (Precepts), 'Samadhi' (concentration), and 'Panya' (wisdom). Sila refers to moral actions, arising from the mind to speech and to action. Moral behaviours or ethics included within the 'Five Precepts' are: do not kill or harm, avoid stealing, avoid sexual misconduct, avoid lying and avoid alcohol and other intoxicants (Ven. Vajiragnana, 1992).

The first investigation begins with the First Buddhist Precept—"do not kill or harm other living beings"—which aligns closely with Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), stating that "everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of person." This alignment extends to the remaining four precepts: as one has a duty to refrain from taking life, others hold the right to life and protection from harm; as one must abstain from sexual misconduct, others possess the right to bodily integrity; as one must not lie, others are entitled to truthful communication. These parallels illustrate a fundamental compatibility between Buddhist ethics and universal human rights discourse (Keyes, 2011). The Five Precepts—abstaining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and intoxication—serve as the foundation of Buddhist moral conduct and function as restraints against unwholesome behaviours, both for individual development and social harmony. As the most basic moral code for lay Buddhists, they can be interpreted as a religious articulation of human rights principles

(Green & King, 2012). In this light, the precepts promote human welfare, justice, and peace by encouraging ethical responsibility. As Vajiragnana argues in *Justice and Buddhism*, "man is responsible for society; it is he who makes it good or bad through his actions" (Goenka, 1998).

The Four Noble Truths and the Eight-Fold Noble Path

The Four Noble Truths and Eight-Fold Noble Paths are one of the most fundamental and significant teachings of the Buddha, which deal with 'duhkha (suffering)' and ways to escape suffering. Duhkha described in the Buddha's sermons, are found in all human beings regardless of race, nationality or religion. The Four Noble Truths are: Duhkha (suffering), Samudaya (the cause of suffering), Nirodha (the cessation of duhkha) and Magga (the eightfold path to cessation of duhkha). The teaching of the Fourth Noble Truth is significant because it brings us to the core understanding of how Buddhism views birth and human life and what it takes to understand the human condition. Before further discussion on the issue of human rights and human rights violations, an exploration of the understanding of the human condition is needed.

> 'Life is Duhkha' was the Buddha's First Sermon in which he said;
> '*Now this, O monks, is the noble truth of duhkha. Birth is duhkha, sickness is duhkha, and death is duhkha. Sorrow, lamentation, dejection, and despair are duhkha. Contact with unpleasant things is duhkha, and separation from what one wishes is duhkha. In short, the Five Aggregates onto which one grasps are duhkha."*

The First Truth was the truth of 'duhkha', which translates into English as 'suffering'. In this sermon, it is said that duhkha is found in at least four kinds of situations that arise in ordinary life. First, there are dissatisfactory conditions associated with physical processes such as old age, sickness and death. Second, are dissatisfactory conditions, such as sorrow and dejection, associated with mental-emotional processes. Third, there is the particular dissatisfaction one finds with unpleasant things. Fourth, there is the dissatisfaction one finds in not possessing the things one wants or needs (Mitchell & Jacoby, 2013).

According to the Buddha, these four kinds of human conditions of suffering arise from the same root causes, which is the way humans are in denial or do not have the right understanding of 'impermanence'. Humans tend to cling to or grasp things (both tangible and intangible), which leads to dissatisfaction.

In 2012, Aung San Suu Kyi, in her Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, mentioned duhkha. Stating that 'as a Buddhist, I had heard about duhkha, generally translated as suffering, since I was a small child. I was particularly intrigued by the last two kinds of suffering: to be parted from those one loves and to be forced to live in propinquity with those one does not love. What experiences might our Lord Buddha have undergone in his own life that he had included these two states among the great sufferings? I thought of prisoners and refugees, of migrant workers and victims of human trafficking, of that great mass of the uprooted of the earth who have been torn away from their homes, parted from families and friends, forced to live out their lives among strangers who are not always welcoming. When suffering is ignored, there will be the seed of conflict. Living in isolation, I have ample time to reflect on the meaning of words and precepts that I have known and accepted all my life. If suffering is an unavoidable part of our existence, we should try to alleviate suffering, as far as possible, in a practical and earthly way." (Frye & Suchan, 2017). The teaching of suffering is crucial in Buddhism as it was the Buddha who, in his determination to gain enlightenment, found ways to understand human suffering and ways to alleviate or even eradicate those sufferings. He saw suffering as an inescapable fact of all humans as they are bound to sickness, old age, decay, and death. Every living creature must face all these. The Buddha was not satisfied with the limited explanations of the intellect as he continued to probe within himself to experience the real nature of suffering (Hart, 2011). The Eight Noble Paths is a path of purification that states that anyone who walks into that path is becoming noble-hearted and freed from suffering. The steps of the Eight-Fold Noble Path are arranged under three categories. The first two steps are 'proper view' (right understanding and right thought). The second category is 'proper conduct' (right speech, right action and right livelihood) and lastly, 'proper practice' (right effort, mindfulness, right concentration). Thus far, it is observable that the original teaching of Buddhism, if practised by all Buddhists, leaves no room for human rights violations. Buddhism or Buddha's Dharma encourages and emphasises heavily on how individuals should act in a society toward one another and how self-transformation is needed to become a better human with full compassion and respect towards others.

Human rights and 'Engaged Buddhism'

This section aims to examine how Buddhism and human rights is incorporated at a practical level by examining the relatively new concept of 'Engaged Buddhism'. Engaged Buddhism is an alternative approach to human rights from a contemporary Asian context, which shifts away from conventional or stereotypical understandings of traditional Buddhism, whereby Buddhist practitioners are supposed to aspire towards enlightenment through individual spiritual practice and leave worldly matters aside. To separate worldly matter and spiritual practice is not where Engaged Buddhism differs. Engaged Buddhism was born from the Mahayana branch of Buddhism (Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Salzberg, 2020). Mahayana and Theravada branches of Buddhism are different in terms of the way they view 'enlightenment'. While Theravada Buddhism believes that each 'individual', through the Eight-Fold Noble Path, can achieve spiritual liberation or enlightenment alone or with those who happen to walk the same path. Mahayana Buddhism (a larger vehicle) encourages a 'collective' effort to enlightenment and gives much emphasis on the 'Sangha' (Buddhist community). Mahayana Buddhism stresses the responsibility that each individual has towards others and the community of Buddhist to help others attain enlightenment (Hetherington, 2011). Thus, they differ in their orientation towards individualism and communalism and the obligations of the individual towards the aforementioned. Therefore, when it comes to social activism and social engagement, Mahayana Buddhism plays a more significant role in that is stresses how an individual should be engaged with others to help them on their path of enlightenment, justice and social living on a consistent and current basis, not a dogmatic one of individualism and waiting for rebirth (Keyes, 2011).

Shedding new light on Buddhism and combining spiritual Buddhist practice of mindfulness meditation, and applying it to solve problems outside oneself, is one of the fundamental principles of Engaged Buddhism. Buddhist human rights activists in Asia who apply Engaged Buddhism's approach draw closer to people's everyday lives through utilising traditional Buddhist practice not only at the individual level but also by synthesising human spirituality with social responsibility as a human being (MacNaughton and Frey, 2011).

To understand how Buddhism and human rights can work hand in hand toward peace, this part of the paper will explore Engaged Buddhism based on the narrative of contemporary human rights activists and spiritual leaders in Asia

namely Thich Naht Hahn (Vietnamese), His Holiness Dalai Lama (Tibet), Aung San Suu Kyi (Myanmar), Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (Thailand), Sulak Sivaraksa (Thailand) and Maha Ghosanda (Cambodia) who came from three major Buddhist schools of Vajarayana, Mahayana, and Theravada respectively. The proximity of the human rights struggles in Burma and Tibet inspires this study of their respective leaders. While there is a debate among Buddhist intellectuals about the extent to which the concept of human rights is compatible with Buddhist culture, Buddhist activists continue to rely heavily upon the language of human rights as an integral part of their work (Keyes, 2011).

'Engaged Buddhism' in Asia

> "When bombs begin to fall on people, you cannot stay in the meditation hall at all the time. Meditation is about the awareness of what is going on-not only in your body and in your feelings, but all around you"
> Thich Naht Hahn, Vietnamese Zen monk

Engaged Buddhism scholarship is wide and has been applied to studies of business and the successful generational handover of business enterprises of non-kin-based succession to carry on social legacies of entrepreneurship (Burton et al., 2022). Yadav (2024) traces the basis and evolution of engaged Buddhism, finding the material world applicability of Buddhist principles outside of monastic life through active social engagement. Vu & Tran (2019) extend the above analysis to the active management of enterprises, finding increased efficacy in management processes through the successful integration of traditional and modern philosophies, including engaged Buddhism. Phuong & Singh (2024) find applicability in a wide range of social endeavours, including social inequality and conflict management, due to the grounded principles of empowerment through Buddhist ethics and collective action. Somers (2022) argues that engaged Buddhism is a valuable tool for well-being and application in psychology for persons suffering from mental illness. Somers finds that mindfulness, compassion, active listening, and empathy are essential components for psychological practices that can offer effective methods of support. Vinh et. al. (2021) finds that the application of engaged Buddhism through NGO's, specifically in armed conflict during different phases of conflict, from open conflict to management and reconciliation, can be supported for success.

To the core of this study, Rodloytuk (2021) argues that Buddhism and the UDHR not only share common linkages but, by twinning the language of engaged Buddhism to human rights communities, can gain powerful tools for communication of both grievances and aspirations. Tuan et. al. (2021) find application of Thich Naht Haht in the realm of strategic communication, arguing that Buddhist principles help to anchor and inform means of communication that enable compassion, empathy and engagement. During the Vietnam War (1959-75), Thich Naht Haht, an ordained Zen (a school of Mahayana Buddhist tradition originating in China) monk and a well-known Vietnamese human rights activist, advocated the term 'Engaged Buddhism'. He did this to promote human rights and solve social problems by synthesising traditional spiritual Buddhist practices and social activism to transform one's inner self to bring about changes in the outer world.

During the war, Thich Nhat Hanh and the Buddhist social movement in Vietnam refused to take sides with either the North or the South. Instead, they called for political negotiations, rather than military solutions to war (Mitchell & Jacoby, 2013). After returning from Ph.D studies at Princeton University, Thich Nhat Hanh founded the School of Youth for Social Service, an organisation aimed at Buddhist social engagement during the Vietnam War. During that time, he brought together not only monastic Buddhists but lay people for training in social engagement, liberating practice, peace and reconciliation, healing, and mindfulness meditation practice. Threatened by both the governments of North and South Vietnam since the 1960s, while visiting the West, Thich Nhat Hanh was unable to return to his home country. In 1982, he founded the 'Plum Village', a monastery for monks and nuns and a Buddhist mindfulness meditation practice centre for lay people in southern France.

Thich Nhat Hanh (1926–2022), a Vietnamese Zen master and peace activist, travelled extensively to lead lectures and mindfulness meditation retreats worldwide, believing that individual transformation is foundational to societal harmony (Hanh, 1999). Over his lifetime, he authored numerous influential works, most notably The Miracle of Mindfulness (1999) and Peace Is Every Step (1992), that articulate how conscious awareness and compassionate action can cultivate lasting inner and outer peace (Hanh, 2010). In recognition of these contributions, Martin Luther King Jr. nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize

in 1967, praising his role in promoting reconciliation and nonviolent resistance (Plum Village Mindfulness Practice Center, n.d.).

Engaged Buddhism offers a significant alternative approach to human rights by recognising human spirituality as a private matter and as a means to utilise it in the public sphere to restore a society during and after conflict, fostering and cultivating peace and harmony in a society experiencing conflict. This approach is based on the Buddhist observation that the condition of the inner self mirrors that of the outer world. Internal moral character determines external behaviour in society. In other words, Engaged Buddhism means Buddhists who are seeking ways to apply the insights from meditation practices and the Buddha's teachings of Dharma and apply them to social, political, environmental situations, and economic suffering and injustice. Generated from the understanding that the roots of evil and human rights abuse are not external to human beings, but are the internal mental afflictions of greed, hatred, anger, and delusion (Kittle, 2011). Engaged Buddhism suggests that to deal with the struggle for human rights in the external world, one needs an understanding of 'human suffering'. To alleviate those sufferings or situations which created suffering, an inner transformation is needed to bring about both personal and social changes; the approach that arises from within by working at the inner-self level.

According to Hanh (1999), developing an insightful perception of oneself arises through practising one's mindfulness meditation in bringing one back into the present moment and fully observing one's body and mind through one's breath. Then, deeper forms of meditation lead one to a fuller insight into one's mind, getting rid of the burdens one finds and discovering the inter-being of life (Hanh, 2001). Thereby, one is in touch not only with humanity's shared suffering but also with a deeper source of inner peace to give to others (Mitchell & Jacoby, 2013). Engaged Buddhism promotes social activism, which underlines and combines selflessness, love, and compassion, the key message emphasised by the Dalai Lama, among other teachings of the Buddha. In 'Healing Heart and Mind: The Pursuit of Human Rights in Engaged Buddhism,' Kittle exemplified the work of Aung San Suu Kyi and the Dalai Lama as efforts of the inner work, which accompanied efforts in the external world to alleviate suffering. In other words, Engaged Buddhist practitioners must work on their spiritual self while serving society at the same time. A truly non-dualistic understanding of the relation between enlightenment and engagement "honours both 'inner' work and 'outer'

work as mutually reinforcing and ultimately inseparable" (Kraft, 2011). An approach that encompasses both inner and outer manifestations is therefore essential. The full flourishing of human rights depends upon consideration of the whole person, inner and outer, heart and mind, and Engaged Buddhism offers a distinctive example of this integrative path.

In Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1979) killed millions of Cambodians by torture, execution, overwork, starvation, or disease. King has noted that even after the regime, the country has been left in a prolonged state of darkness, with a high level of lawlessness and corruption. Many schools and Buddhist temples were destroyed, leading to a significant loss of traditional Buddhist-based morality. Maha Ghosananda, a Cambodian monk known as Gandhi of Cambodia, has taken a leadership role in rebuilding Cambodia. He emphasized that Buddhism never vanished from the hearts of the Cambodian people during those years and people of Cambodia must obtain all basic human rights, including the right to freely pursue economic, social and cultural development and rights to self-determination. Through the Cambodian Institute of Human Rights, monks are trained in human rights and expected to be able to teach in their sermons. Cambodia is a great example of how Buddhist monks incorporated the human rights language and continued the debate on the topic.[1]

The Buddha lived in a context where spiritual inquiry and teaching proceeded freely; there was no need for state-sponsored protection of religion (Witte, 2012). As Donnelly (2013) observes, it was the rise of modern, capitalist nation-states in Europe that first gave impetus to formal human-rights thinking; only later did Asian societies confront similar market-driven challenges to individual dignity. In twentieth-century Thailand, Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu (1906–1993) embodied a synthesis of personal awakening and social critique. Rejecting the comforts of the city sangha, he founded Suan Mokkh, "The Garden of Liberation," where he combined rigorous scriptural study with intensive meditation practice. As both monk and social critic, he insisted that inner transformation and societal renewal are inseparable. In Handbook for Mankind, he distilled these lectures into a guide for ethical living (Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, 2005), and in The Three Wishes he urged practitioners to "get to the core of one's

[1] See Sulak Sivaraksa in Modern Buddhism in Asia, Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience, for discussion on how the traditional Buddhist language of rights does not exist or is not referred to, but rather how Buddhism discusses duties and responsibilities of the Sangha.

religion," "build mutual understanding between religions," and "lead the world out of materialism" (Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, 2009, p. 27). Buddhadasa Bhikku highly valued human rights as shown in all of his work; in nearly every book he has written, he inserted a list of acts of kindness, the way humans should treat one another. This implies and reflects a non-conventional form of rights, duties and responsibilities.[2]

Conclusion

While Buddhism expresses the language of rights differently from conventional human rights discourse, numerous scholars argue that the concept of human rights is embedded within Buddhist thought. One key contribution Buddhism offers is a holistic, duty-based approach that emphasises ethical responsibility and interconnectedness over individualism. This perspective challenges the Western-centric, often individualistic framing of human rights and responds to critiques about their universality. Engaged Buddhism, in particular, seeks to overcome the dualistic worldview that separates individuals from one another and nature. By emphasising the interdependence of all beings and the moral imperative not to harm, it provides a philosophical and ethical foundation for a more inclusive and peace-oriented understanding of rights. Rather than dismissing human rights as incompatible with non-Western traditions, integrating Buddhist values, such as compassion, mindfulness, and non-harm, can enrich and expand the discourse. In doing so, human rights can better fulfil their original aim: to protect all beings and foster global justice and peace. Ultimately, Buddhism contributes meaningfully to reimagining human rights in ways that emphasise mutual care, shared responsibility, and collective well-being. In doing so, it strengthens the foundational purpose of human rights: to protect all beings, promote justice, and cultivate a more peaceful and harmonious world.

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