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# **The Concept of Peace** as the Central Notion of Buddhist Social Philosophy

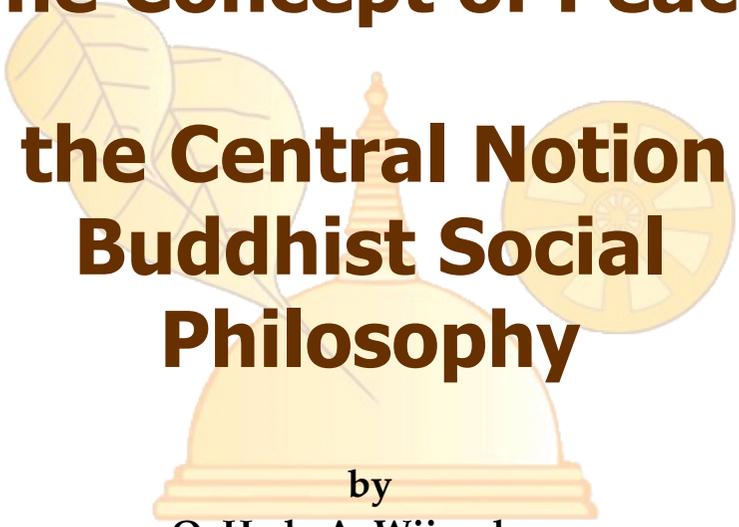
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**BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY**

# **The Concept of Peace as the Central Notion of Buddhist Social Philosophy**



by

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# The Concept of Peace

## as the Central Notion of Buddhist Social Philosophy

**I**t has been a characteristic of Buddhist studies in the past that the socio-moral aspect of its philosophy has received scant attention at the hands of writers both of the East and West. This deficiency can be regarded as being due to several reasons, but one fact stands out clearly. In the East, students of the subject have regarded Buddhism purely as a personal religion, and have dealt with it only from the point of view of individual ethics and practice, while the scholars of the West appear to have engaged themselves chiefly in the historical and metaphysical treatment of Buddhist ideas. Thus, the socio-ethical aspect of Buddhist philosophy has hardly received the attention it deserves. Nevertheless, a careful student of Buddhism in any of its forms, whether Hinayana or Mahayana, will not fail to be impressed by the wealth of data afforded by these texts regarding the socio-moral problems current at the time of their composition. In a previous study [1]

the present writer has emphasized the socio-ethical aspect of Buddhism as recorded in the Pali Canon, and attempted a brief treatment of the social, political, and juristic principles contained in some of the earliest books. It may be mentioned in this connection that, in regard to socio-philosophical doctrines, very little difference is found between the Pali and other sources, such as the Buddhist Sanskrit literature. The social ethics of Buddhism are common to all schools, and the minor differences that may be found are often due to variations of emphases.

It is necessary to point out at the very outset that the Buddha did not concern himself directly with socio-philosophical matters, but referred to them only as adjuncts to the concept of *dukkha* (or the general unsatisfactoriness of empirical existence) and the release (*nissaraṇa*) from it. The Buddha was averse to philosophizing or theorizing for its own sake, and consequently a social philosophy can be found in Buddhism only as inferable from its practical socio-moral postulates. Hence, in Buddhism the more important aspect of its social philosophy relates mainly to the sphere of ethics, particularly of psychological ethics. Reason and belief (faith) are inadequate in themselves to bring man to the *summum bonum*, for it was the conviction of the Buddha that one had to establish oneself in moral conduct (*sīla*)

before embarking upon any kind of spiritual progress, or even of progress in worldly affairs. In this attempt, although man's primary concern is with his own inner purification, the ethical nature of the struggle involves him in the problem of his relationship to others, that is to say, his fellow-beings both human and non-human (the relationship of man to other sentient beings receiving considerable emphasis in Buddhism). In the actual practice of social morality, however, it is primarily the individual's contact with the human community or society that becomes ethically important, and, therefore, it is such human relationships that constitute the main problem for the Buddhist just as for every other system of social philosophy.

A study of early Buddhist literature reveals the fact that the concept of peace appears as the pivotal point in the Buddhist system of social ethics. As generally understood in the West, the notion of peace refers to absence of strife among groups, whether they are regarded as classes, communities, races, or nations. It is not customary in the idiom of the West to speak of peace as between individuals within the same group. In Buddhism and other Indian religions, however, the primary emphasis is on the individual aspect of peace, and its social consequences are held to follow only from the centre of the individual's own psychology.

The most prominent word for peace, *santi* (Skr. I), [2] denotes essentially the absence of conflict in the individual's mind, and in the fundamental sense refers to the absolute state of mental quietude expressed by the term nirvana (Pali *nibbāna*). In the Pali Canon it is characterized as the "haven of peace" (*santipadam*). [3] One of the oldest texts, the Sutta Nipāta, refers to internal peace (*ajjhatta-santi*) as resulting from the elimination of ideological and other conflicts of the mind (v. 837).

From the point of view of the Buddha's teaching, it is clear that the peace of the community depends on the peacefulness or good will of the individual members of the community, and the same holds good even if we enlarge the community to include the whole world. For Buddhism regards peace as a subjective quality, having an individual centre and manifestation. It is because of this fact that the Buddha emphasized the subjective aspect of his social ethic more than the mere externals of social behaviour. A socio-moral act, according to Buddhism, gains the greater part of its practical validity from the purity of its source, which is no other than the psychology of the individual responsible for its conception and execution. In the Sutta-Nipāta (v.260), it is admitted that satisfactory external (i.e. environmental) conditions are necessary for a healthy and peaceful

social life, but the Buddha always insisted that the factors conditioning man's social life are in a deeper sense psychological. Consequently, according to Buddhism, the social sense or *sensus communis* along with its ethic is in origin personal and individual, and it is only in its application that it assumes a reciprocal character. In the ultimate analysis, therefore, peace is a psychological condition or attitude, a function of individual thought and feeling. Thus peace in the general social sense is only the end result of the cultivation of peacefulness by the individual, who is the ultimate unit of the social community.

This psychological attitude tending to peace in society is further analysed in Buddhism into four cardinal states of thought and feeling called the four sublime moods (*brahmavihāra*). These four appear the same in all schools of Buddhism. In Pali they are listed as *mettā*, *karuṇā*, *mudita* and *upekkhā*, while the Buddhist Sanskrit sources give the equivalent forms as *maitri*, *karuṇā*, *mudita* and *upekṣa*. Etymologically and conceptually they are the same, and mean friendly feeling, sympathy, congratulatory benevolence, and equanimity, respectively. All social relationships, according to the Buddha, have to be based on these four moods or attitudes, and thus they are regarded as representing the highest (*brahma*) conditions for social well-being. In fact, it may be rightly asserted that the

concept of the brahmavihāras sums up the whole of Buddhist social philosophy and gives it in a nutshell. Psychologically considered, these four sublime moods (or moral attitudes of the individual towards his fellow-creatures) are only partial aspects of a single basic orientation of the individual mind with respect to humanity and non-human sentient beings, and can correctly be subsumed under the generic term benevolence. [4] This spirit of benevolence is the origin and source of all peace and goodwill among men, according to Buddhist social philosophy.

The first of these sublime attitudes is given as *mettā* (Skr. *maitri*) which indicates the exercise of friendliness towards one's fellow beings in all situations. It is a positive state of mind, being defined as "the desire to bring about the happiness and well-being of others in society." In fact, such friendliness or universal love is regarded in Buddhism as the basis of all social ethics, the cornerstone of the edifice of Buddhist benevolence or goodwill among men which is the sine qua non of peace. The importance of this altruistic virtue for Buddhist ethics can be seen from the fact that, according to the Theravada tradition, the next Buddha to appear in the world will be known as Metteyya or the "Buddha of Universal Love," while Mahayana literature has Maitreya as one of the future Bodhisattvas. Peace and goodwill among men cannot

be achieved, according to Buddhism, without this basic attitude of friendly feeling which must be exercised irrespective of race or colour, religion or political creed, or even in spite of the fact that the other is one's enemy. Once the Buddha admonished his disciples thus: "If villainous bandits were to carve you limb from limb with a two-handled saw, even then the one that should give way to anger would not be obeying my teaching. Even then be it your task to preserve your hearts unmoved, never to allow an ill word to pass your lips, but always to abide in friendliness and goodwill, with no hate in your hearts, enfolding in radiant thoughts of love the bandit [who tortures you], and, making that the basis, to envelop the entire world in your radiant thoughts of love, noble, vast and beyond measure, in which there will be no hatred or thought of harm." [5] There are other places too in the Pali Canon where the exercise of this attitude of love and friendliness is recommended even when one is placed under the most trying circumstances. [6] Modern writers generally translate the word *mettā* as "love," but it has been pointed out that "love" has specific Christian associations and may not be suitable for a Buddhist concept which emphasizes more the universal rather than its personal aspect. Buddhism uses the word as the antidote to such evil and antisocial tendencies as malevolence

(*vyāpāda*) and violence (*hiṃsa*) which endanger peace.

The next brahmavihāra is *karuṇā*, that attitude which is conveyed by terms like sympathy, compassion, kindness, pity, mercy. It is explained in the Pali tradition as “the desire to remove bane and sorrow from one’s fellow-beings.” Here the basic psychological attitude is one of sympathy for all that suffer. Perhaps the German term *Mitleid* expresses this idea better than any other European word. Both in Pali and Buddhist Sanskrit literature, words like *anukampa*, compassion, and *dāya*, sharing of others sorrows, are used as synonyms of *karuṇā*. This virtue helps to eliminate callousness and indifference to the pain and suffering of others. It is because of this specific character of *karuṇā* as the chief weapon in eliminating sorrow (*dukkha*) that the Mahayanists give it the pre-eminent place among the brahmavihāras, whereas in Theravada Buddhism *mettā* occupies the central position. A Buddha’s *karuṇā* is discussed in Mahayana literature under thirty-two aspects. [7] He pities all beings because they are enmeshed in various sins and calamities. It can easily be seen that this ideal is more in keeping with the bodhisattva doctrine of the Mahayanists. It is *karuṇā* that produces the Thought of Enlightenment in the Bodhisattva, and prompts his self-sacrifice in forsaking his own nirvana for the good of other beings. The relative positions of *maitri* and

karuṇā in the two systems, however, indicate merely a difference in emphasis; for even in Theravada Buddhism karuṇā plays a very important role, although mettā is given more prominence.

The third sublime attitude is *mudita*, or congratulatory benevolence, which is described in the Pali tradition as “the desire to see others rejoicing in their happiness and to feel happy with them.” It can be seen that this attitude merely complements karuṇā, or “sorrowing in others sorrow.” This complementary nature of the two attitudes cannot be better implied than by rendering *mudita* by the German word *Mitfreude*, just as translating karuṇā by the German expression *das Mitleid* as was suggested above. Etymologically, the term *mudita*, congratulatory joy, is not to be confused with the word *mudutā* (“softness,” Skr. *mudṛtā*), sometimes given as its equivalent, for it is quite clear that it is derived from the earlier Vedic noun *mud*, “joy.” This basic attitude is meant to counteract all feelings of jealousy and rivalry in social dealings. Hence it is as significant for social concord and peace as the other two brahmavihāras.

With regard to the fourth sublime attitude, called *nissaraṇa* in Pali and *upekṣa* in Buddhist Sanskrit, it must be admitted that the concept appears to be subjective and lacking in that character of reciprocity which the other three imply. But a closer scrutiny of its

application is bound to dispel such an impression. It is true that the term etymologically signifies indifference, or rather disinterestedness. Such an interpretation would naturally divest the term of its social significance. But the incidence of the word in early Buddhist literature clearly shows that it is of as great social value as the other brahmavihāras. According to Buddhism, the cultivation of social virtues must be free from all personal bias or selfhood (*atta-dit̥ṭhi*). The practice of the brahmavihāras, in other words, should be based on a fundamental indifference to their consequences on the part of the subject. Love and sympathy become sublime only when they are applied universally, not selfishly limited to any one particular object of interest. Hence the brahmavihāras are designated as the unlimited (*appamaññā*). [8] It is for this reason that Buddhist writers employ the word “equanimity” in rendering the term *nissaraṇa*. As a mental attitude with social application or altruistic value, *nissaraṇa* in the context of the brahmavihāras must be regarded as parallel to *samānattatā*, [9] (Skr. *samānātmata*) or “evenness of mind” given in Buddhism as the fourth and last of the four bases of service (*catusaṅgaha-vatthu*), significantly paraphrased in the older Buddhist Sanskrit works as *samāna-sukha-dukkhatā*, [10] or “equanimity in the face of joy and sorrow.”

The constant, methodical, and deliberate cultivation of these brahmavihāras constitutes a form of meditation (*bhāvanā*) that is of the highest social significance. The oft-repeated formula in the Canon runs as follows:

“Here, o monks, a disciple dwells pervading one direction with his heart filled with friendliness [or love], likewise the second, the third, and the fourth direction; so above, below, and around; he dwells pervading the entire world, everywhere and equally, with his heart filled with friendliness, abundant, grown great, measureless, free from enmity, and free from malevolence.” [11] The same is repeated with the necessary changes for the other brahmavihāras as well. In the Mahayana texts too a similar formula occurs as a process of meditation exercised by the Bodhisattva: “He abides pervading the whole universe [with its chief element, the truth, and its remotest element, space] with his mind accompanied by *maitri*, with vast, great, undivided, unlimited, and universal freedom from hatred, rivalry, narrow-mindedness, and harmfulness.” [12] This too is repeated,

substituting *karuṇā*, *mudita*, and *upekṣa* for *maitri*. The repeated contemplation of these sublime states is constantly recommended in the Buddhist books as providing the best antidote to all forms of social conflicts and tensions. In the words of a European Buddhist monk, “These four attitudes of mind provide in fact the answer to all situations arising from social contact. They are the great removers of tension, the great peacemakers in social conflict, the great healers of wounds suffered in the struggle for existence; levellers of social barriers, builders of harmonious communities ... promoters of human brotherhood against the forces of egotism.” [13]

As has been pointed out above, these four sublime attitudes, or brahmavihāras, can be comprehended within the single ethical concept of benevolence. It is the matrix from which issue all the postulates of Buddhist social ethics, the foundation upon which is built the whole edifice of Buddhist social philosophy. For benevolence is the antidote to all forms of conflict (*paṭigha*) and hatred (*dosa*, Skr. *dveṣa*) which in the ultimate analysis are found to lie at the bottom of every type of tension. Hence the concept of

benevolence emerges in Buddhist social philosophy as the essential foundation for peace. The Buddha held that “hatred at no time does cease through hatred; hatred ceases only through the negation of hatred (i.e. benevolence).” [14] The famous Discourse on Universal Love goes even further and gives the admonition to those who would preserve peace to love all beings at all times as a mother protects her only child. “Whatever living beings there are in existence, whether feeble or strong, without any exception, whether tall, big, medium-sized, short, small or great; whether seen or unseen, living near or far, those already born or those seeking birth, may all such beings be happy at heart. Let not anyone deceive another; let no one disdain another under any circumstances; let no one wish ill to any other through enmity or resentment. As a mother guards her only son at the risk of her own life, so may one develop a boundless heart [of love] towards all creatures ...” [15] From such a lofty ethical point of view, the maintenance of peace, even in the most critical social situation, becomes a categorical imperative.

Thus, in Buddhism war on any account comes to be condemned, for even so-called “wars of defence” are violations of the basic attitude of benevolence. Even the enemy has to be loved like every other being in existence. The futility of war was emphasized by the

Buddha when he appeared before his own relatives, the Sakyans and the Koliyans, who were about to plunge into a war of mutual destruction over an insignificant dispute regarding the waters of a river (the Rohiṇi) that flowed through their two states. The Buddha ironically reminded them that the human blood they were going to let flow was much more precious than the waters for which they were prepared to sacrifice their lives. It is this typically Buddhist idea of peace that runs through the Edicts of Asoka and gives the final touch of grace to the humanism of his character. It is now beyond dispute that it was primarily due to the influence of Buddhism that the great Emperor renounced all conquest by war and violence, and resorted to *dhammavijaya* or “winning by righteousness.” One of the principal components of the social ethic of Asoka, as expressed in his famous concept of dhamma (Skr. dharma), is termed *dāya* [16] or “compassion” (lit. sharing of others’ sorrows) which, as shown above, is only the synonym for *karuṇā*, the second brahmavihāra of Buddhism. Thus, quite in keeping with the ethics of benevolence as expounded by the Buddha, Asoka denounces such sinful qualities of heart as fierceness, anger, and envy, [17] which as mentioned previously constitute the very opposite of Buddhist benevolence. One can point out several other similarities between

Asoka's Dhamma and the socio-morality inculcated in the brahmavihāras. In his great emphasis on compassion and humanity this great Indian ruler certainly stands out as the most renowned exponent of the Buddhist concept of benevolence, goodwill, and peace among men that the world has ever seen.

From what has been said above it should be clear that the concept of peace, according to Buddhism, arises from the basic socio-moral attitude of benevolence expressed in the fourfold formula of *mettā-karuṇā-mudita-nissaraṇa*. Thus peace in the ultimate analysis is of psychological origin. It is only a mind free from anger and hatred, callousness and hardheartedness, jealousy and envy, egotistic bias and selfishness that can radiate peace which is the end-result of benevolent feelings exercised by individuals in their social actions. The attempt to secure peace through such external instruments of diplomacy as pacts and alliances between nations and other groups, is, from the Buddhist point of view, utterly futile. It ignores the real psychological foundation of peace which is the attitude of benevolence radiating from individual centres. Thus the perennial lesson of Buddhist social philosophy is that peace can only be achieved by the practice of benevolent qualities, chiefly of *mettā* or universal love, which, as the great Indian poet and humanist, Rabindranath Tagore,

realized, in his *Sadhana* (p. 106), could only result from the cultivation of the brahmavihāras as taught twenty-four centuries earlier by that greatest of humanists, the Buddha.

# Notes

1. *Buddhism and Society*, published by the Bauddha Sahitya Sabha, Colombo. [\[Back\]](#)
2. Indian terms are given generally in their Pali form. Their Sanskrit equivalents are cited as "Skr." [\[Back\]](#)
3. *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, II. p. 18 (P.T.S. ed.). [\[Back\]](#)
4. See *The Ethics of Buddhism* by S. Tachibana, Chapter XIII, London 1926. [\[Back\]](#)
5. *Majjhima Nikāya*, Sutta 21. [\[Back\]](#)
6. See the conversation between Puṇṇa and the Buddha, *Ibid.*, Sutta 145. [\[Back\]](#)
7. *The Bodhisattva Doctrine*, by Har Dayal, pp. 24, 61, 173. London 1932. [\[Back\]](#)
8. *Dīgha Nikāya*, III. p. 223. (P.T.S. edn.). [\[Back\]](#)
9. *Ibid.*, III. p. 152. [\[Back\]](#)
10. *Mahāvastu*, I. 3. [\[Back\]](#)
11. *Dīgha Nikāya*, I, p. 250 etc. [\[Back\]](#)
12. *Dasabhūmika Sutra*, p. 34. Paris 1926. [\[Back\]](#)
13. Ven. Nyanaponika Thera, *The Four Sublime States*,

p. i. (Reprinted as *Four Sublime State and The Practice of Loving Kindness*, Wheel 6/7. Kandy: BPS, 1998.) [\[Back\]](#)

4. Dhammapada, verse 5. [\[Back\]](#)
5. Sutta Nipāta, verses 146–150. [\[Back\]](#)
6. Pillar Edict II. [\[Back\]](#)
7. Pillar Edict III [\[Back\]](#)

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