

Buddhist Perspectives on Equality

Arvind Kumar Singh

In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a campaign to project a new idea of the person was launched by forging a discourse about the universal rights of man, irrespective of social or political status. However, it was only in the second half of the twentieth century, specially after the Second World War, that a comprehensive international system of human rights promotion and projection was set up. It was made possible mainly due to the efforts of the United Nations with its regional intergovernmental organizations. Thus, according to Leah Levin, the concept of human rights was introduced and developed by thinkers from various cultural and religious traditions with an important contribution from statesmen and lawyers to promote this idea.¹ In this era of division and disharmony, questions of equality should have a greater appeal than it did before. And here the teachings of the Buddha on equality can contribute a lot to human society. As pointed out above, this very idea has inspired the author to look into the Buddha's teachings and explore the concept of equality in Buddhism.

In the field of religion, the concept of human rights seems to be a modern concept and unknown in the Buddhist doctrine in both traditions, neither in the Pāli canon nor in the Mahāyāna Sūtras as its doctrine, in general, attach much importance to liberation. On the other hand, as the Buddhist doctrine of No-self, which denies the existence of the Self, the owner of rights, Buddhism seems to be a stranger in the discussion about human rights. It emphasizes duties and obligations rather than "rights." No doubt, Buddhism is a late comer to the cause of human rights. Moreover, most of its history and doctrine have been preoccupied with other concerns.² It has never developed any comprehensive social philosophy or theory. Damien Keown suggests that the concern for human rights is a post-religious phenomenon which has more to do with secular ideologies and power-politics than religion. Hence, it is unreasonable to accuse Buddhism of neglect in the discussion of human rights.³

The Buddha's ideas on equality can be traced to the time when he set off on his mission by asking his first five disciples to propagate the new faith for the good and happiness of the world. In the pre-independence period of Indian history, the Buddha's teachings on equality influenced many great Indian thinkers, such as Rabindranath Tagore and Swami Vivekananda. They appreciated the Buddha's attitude towards humanism⁴ and praised him as the first person to teach universal brotherhood of man,⁵ the only great Indian philosopher who would not recognize discrimination among the people,⁶ the great preacher of equality among humans.⁷ Buddhist scholars such as P. Lakshmi Narasu⁸, G.P. Malalasekera, and K. N. Jayatileke have also tried to elucidate the impact of the Buddha's teaching of equality on society.⁹ No doubt, for thousands of years, Buddhism has built patterns of civilization with the force of peace. However, recently, most of the Western scholars have depicted the Buddha as only the spiritual Master of *Nirvāna*. His concern was to reform individuals and help them to leave society forever, not to reform the world.¹⁰ All in all, he was not a social reformer nor did he make an attempt to be one.¹¹

Before dealing with the concept of equality in Buddhism, it is necessary to know the meaning of equality first. The following few pages are focused on outlining the different aspects of the concept of equality.

The concept of equality has been discussed and debated since ancient times, not only in social but also in political and philosophical thought. Historians tell us that 2500 years ago, Aristotle argued in his work, *The Politics* that arguments on equality and inequality were beyond the warfare inside states.¹² Discussions on its definition have led in several directions, often following social and political movements, as it depends upon the time at which it is viewed, the perspective from which it is viewed, the purpose for which it is viewed.¹³ In modern times, the definition of equality has become more and more diverse as it encompasses many more newly emerging issues and matters, such as the distribution of income and wealth, access to public services, the distribution of work and employment opportunities, the political representation of different groups and the control of natural resources among nations etc. The definitions of equality, hence, play a pivotal role but a long course of political, social and philosophical debates due to the use of the same terms in different connotations confuse the issue.

The word "equal" implies the meaning of sameness in degree, size, amount, level, nature and so on. Definition in dictionaries suggests also an evenness of balance, a uniformity of means and outcomes, and all these nuances of thought are absorbed in the nominative form "Equality." In mathematics, two objects are equal if they are precisely the same in every way, denoted by the sign of Equality " $=$ ". In the philosophical and social context, equality is decided on by comparing some particular aspect of a person (such as income or wealth or happiness or opportunities or rights or needs-fulfillments) with the same aspect of another person. It signifies a qualitative relationship, a correspondence between a group of different objects, persons, process or circumstances that have the same qualities in at least one respect, but not in all respects¹⁴ i.e., regarding one specific feature, with differences in others. Two non-identical objects are never completely equal. They are different at least in their spatiotemporal location. If these objects do not differ, they should not be called 'equal' but rather 'identical.' Thus, the word equality must be distinguished from identity. Concept of identity suggests that one and the same object corresponds to each other in all its features. Equality also differs from similarity. Similarity merely denotes an approximate correspondence. A related word in terms of usage is "egalitarian", but this word is confined more to the principle of Equality of Rights and opportunities in the social context. To some, Equality is similar to justice. No doubt, justice has always been closely connected to the ideas of equality. It is used to judge actions to be right or wrong. The conception of social justice provides a standard of distribution. It determines the shares of different individuals in the distributive aspect of society. Justice supports fairness to individuals providing a fair framework within which each person is enabled to pursue their own good, whether at home, school, workplace, in a group, societies and between peoples in the wider world¹⁵ and it keeps a balance between competing claims of individual in society. It harmonizes conflicting interests and tends to bring about a balance in society. But in the absence of different claims, justice only demands equal treatment.

Exploring the concept of equality, there appears to be a common dichotomy in theoretical discussion between formal equality and substantive equality. Formal equality is characterized by an emphasis on the exclusion of irrelevant considerations that individuals who are alike should be treated alike, according to their actual characteristics, rather than stereotypical assumptions such as class, caste, gender, or religion. This principle can be applied either to single individuals,

whose right to be treated on their own merit can be viewed as a right of individual autonomy, or to groups, whose members seek the same treatment as members of other, similarly situated groups. In short, it sums up what Aristotle said, "*Likes should be treated alike.*"¹⁶ In contrast, substantive equality places greater priority on ensuring equal opportunity. In order to produce equality in practice, substantive equality is willing to tolerate departures from the supposed neutrality of decision-making. It requires abolishing or reducing the differences in wealth, opportunity, or influence.¹⁷ It affirms that sometimes people must be treated differently in order to achieve equality. Substantive equality points out that equal treatment does not produce equal results because of significant differences in the characteristics and circumstances. Advocates of substantive equality demand that rules take account of these differences in order to eliminate the disadvantages. However, the different possibilities have resulted in several kinds of substantive equality, each of which reflects somewhat different substantive ideals. Therefore, determining what differences should be taken into account and in what ways is not always an easy task. Thus, substantive equality is not one theory, but several theories, reflecting multiple types and sources of difference and a number of alternative or overlapping substantive ideals.

The *Aggañña-sutta* is usually translated as genesis (literally means "with the knowledge of beginnings"), genesis in the Buddha's use is always conditioned genesis and the human agency is necessarily conditioned agency. He refused the divine theory of creation propagated by the Brāhmaṇas on both logical and moral grounds. Rather, he explained that the world is one great system with no known beginning, which is constantly evolving and dissolving according to the law of interdependence or co-conditioned causality.

After rejecting the mystification of royal power, the Buddha further explained the emergence of various occupational groups, with the monogamous household as the principle unit of ownership and production. At each stage making the emergence of a particular social stratum, including the monarchy and the various occupational groups, the Buddha repeatedly emphasized that: "Their origin was from just these beings like unto themselves, not different. And it took place in accordance with *Dhamma* and not contrary to *Dhamma.*"¹⁸ Immediately thereafter, the Buddha taught that anyone in society, belonging to any social group could go to

hell, heaven or attain liberation from rebirth. Although the ascetic is in a very much better position to practise right conduct necessary for liberation, that goal neither follows automatically from the social status of the ascetic group nor is it confined to it."¹⁹

According to A. L. Basham, before the Āryans entered India, class division already existed in their tribal structure.²⁰ After conquering the inhabitants, the Āryans settled among the darker aboriginals. They seem to have laid greater stress than before on purity of blood and class division and were hardened to exclude those Dāsas who had found a place on the fringes of Āryan society and those Āryans who had intermarried with the Dāsas and adopted their ways. By the end of the Rg Vedic period, Indian society was divided into four great classes (*Varṇa* System), and this fourfold caste system was given religious sanction and regarded as fundamental.²¹ During the early stage, it was not so rigid but with the passing of time, society became more and more complex. Professions became more and more specialized. The idea of man associated with difference in class became rigid and the occupations went on to be hereditary. When Buddhism arose in India, the class system was the main decisive factor in distinguishing various grades in the society which became a burning problem of the time.²² It was so rigid, partisan, oppressive and even cruel for the vast majority of the people.²³ The idea of higher estimation and lower estimation grew strong in the classification. A man's social position and occupation was always decided by his birth. A person cannot change his caste though he might be a great scholar or warrior or anything, because at that time caste was decided by birth and not by his interest or profession. If he was born to a Śūdra family, he had to remain a Śūdra all his life. Man was destined throughout his life to be noble or ignoble, rich or poor, wise or ignorance because of his birth.

We find in the famous Rg Vedic hymns named *Puruṣa-sūkta* of the 10th Book that a *Brāhmaṇa* was born from the mouth of Brahṁā, the creator, *Kṣatriya* was from his two arms, *Vaiśya* born from his two thighs, and *Śūdra* from his two feet.²⁴ Based on this mythical origin, society was divided into four *Varṇas*, known as *catuḥvarṇa*, and was regulated by the principle of graded inequality as we shall see in the following chapter. The *Brāhmaṇas* or priestly caste, being at the top, was charged with learning, religion, and morality. The *Kṣatriyas* or military class includes

kings and warriors. *Vaiśya* denoted the class of peasants, artisans and merchants. The *Śūdra* caste was that of manual workers and servants. Thus, with this divine origin theory, the *Brāhmaṇas* established their superiority over people who belonged to other castes.

The Buddhist texts record that the *Brāhmaṇas* claimed to be white in complexion and pure in origin and were the direct descendants of the god *Brahmā* and that others were not pure²⁵. They also claimed that they were *Brahmā*'s offspring created by him and born of his mouth and in fact, they were his heirs not the others.²⁶ They laid down four types of service. Any member of all four classes might serve a *Brāhmaṇa*, not the *Brāhmaṇas* do the same for the others.²⁷ They advocated four kinds of legacies binding people to their classes.²⁸ Anyone who leaves his legacy might be regarded as a man of bad conduct.²⁹

Class division does not exist among people whose colour of blood is red and the taste of tears is salt. Did the Buddha say so as Buddhist scholars have claimed? The Buddha's concern in connection with the caste system was firstly, to teach equality and universal fraternity of all castes and secondly, to place all human relations upon a moral basis. He proclaimed his new moral philosophy of equality and liberation for the common welfare of all. He pointed out the fact that a *Brāhmaṇa* was born in the same way as that of other common people. It is that *Brāhmaṇa* women have their seasons, conceive, give birth and give suck like other women³⁰. What is the difference between a man belonging to this caste and a man belonging to another caste? In the case of animal life there are different varieties based on different essential characteristics. For worms, serpents, fish, birds and animals there are marks that constitute their own species. So is the case with plant life. There are differences in creatures endowed with body. But such differences do not exist among humankind which justify classifying them into water-tight compartments as all men are one and the same in their essential characteristics.³¹ The differences amongst men are nominal only. So the caste discrimination based on birth became unreasonable and the superiority of the *Brāhmaṇas* turned out to be meaningless.

According to the Buddha, moral conduct is of the most vital importance to human beings and not birth. Conduct alone makes a man noble or ignoble, makes him a

Brāhmaṇa or an outcaste.³² Any one whose conduct is good is a Brāhmaṇa but, on the other hand, whosoever is wicked in his conduct ought to be regarded as an outcaste. It is not the birth but conduct that causes distinctions among humankind. When the rivers fall into the ocean, they lose their names and forms. Anyone can join his community irrespective of whatever his caste is. In his *Saṅgha*, no body can be privileged merely through birth. His disciples belonged to all strata of society.

The Buddhist perspective in the Mahāyāna texts about class distinctions are somewhat different. The Mahāyāna Buddhism inherits the doctrine of early Buddhist sects but claims the teachings of these early schools only for the hearer, who is still abiding in the magical city, not the final goal - Buddhahood.³³ The early schools are just "small vehicles," the Hīnayāna. It does not reject them but accepts their doctrine as second class. In the Mahāyāna texts, propagating equality among the fourfold class system became an obligation on the part of the Buddha as one of the sixteen dreams he had foreseen before he left his royal family.³⁴ Again, it is not only the duty of Śākyamuni himself but all the Buddhas in the past as well as in the future. However, no Buddhas appear in the suffering world in the low class.³⁵

The burning problem in the Mahāyāna texts is not the distinction among the people like in the Pāli canon but the final goal, the Buddhahood. So all the texts underscore the aim of teaching and encouraging living beings, to arouse *bodhicitta* and practise six perfections, cherish compassion-mindedness, etc. Anyone who has no faith in the *Triple Gem*, who disregard the Buddha's teachings in the Mahāyāna texts, who gets corrupted on the *Bodhisattva's* way might be regarded as an evil person. Interestingly, the figure of the *caṇḍāla* is absolutely different from what the Pāli canon tells us. In the Mahāyāna texts the figure of the *caṇḍāla* is not an outcaste but an evil person. He is classified on a par with butchers, murderers, villains, shameless ones, etc. The *caṇḍāla* seems to be a hindrance, a subject that might disturb or influence a Bodhisattva in his career. Nevertheless, he can be saved finally. Talking about social Equality, the Mahāyāna texts primarily convey metaphysical, psychological and cultural ideas rather than social values.³⁶ In addition, though it is not a Mahāyāna-sūtra, *Vajrasūcī* has been regarded as a manifesto on social equality among the Mahāyāna texts. It reveals a series of reduction *ad absurdum* arguments with vigorous dialectical skill to refute the claims of the *Brāhmaṇas* and indirectly

the whole class system. It discusses if *jīva* (soul), *deha* (body), *jāti* (birth), *jñāna* (knowledge), karma (deeds) or *dhārmika* (performer of meritorious duties) makes a brāhmaṇa. The condition is that brahmaṇhood is not any of these; rather it is the avoidance of sin or wrongdoing.³⁷

To some Buddhist scholars, the Buddha challenged the caste system and, according to them, he was a real social reformer.³⁸ Of course, no one could deny that the Buddha paid a great deal of attention to human liberation in general and the unequal practices prevalent in the caste system during the Buddha's time in particular. He seems to talk tirelessly about the origin and constitution of the caste system. However, all in all, he tried to explain and point out the meaninglessness of this system rather than to challenge it. He acknowledged its existence as a conventional, cultural and external factor, which can be changed, not a divine, fundamental, universal, internal and fixed element in social living and human relations. Equality, for him, could only be achieved when the system is realized by insight of awareness. Therefore, when Buddhism arose in this social, cultural and religious complexity, it quickly became a revolutionary movement which persuaded thousands of people from all walks of society to embrace its doctrine.

According to the Buddhist tradition, in the *Aggañña-sutta*,³⁹ the entire social order including the state and the caste divisions developed gradually among men according to social needs. This *Sutta* repudiates the divine origin of both the state and social order. According to it, caste distinctions had originated in differences in occupations or means of livelihood. Thus, the *Aggañña-sutta* presents the Buddhist explanation of the origin of social grades and distinctions. It describes the origins of human society as part of a process of moral decline from relatively ideal conditions at the start of a circle of world-evolution. Humanity evolved as part of a karmic process rather than coming to be through divine creation.⁴⁰ It tells of the gradual progression of humanity, motivated by greed culminating in a fully evolved society with a king and class system. Neither the state nor the class system has any ultimate sanction other than human expediency. The first king holds office by virtue of a contract with his subjects. It demonstrates the meaninglessness of the brāhmanical caste system as a foundation for society and morality⁴¹ and proceeds to evaluate the four castes in terms of virtues and vices.⁴² It is probably one of the world's oldest versions of the contractual theory of the state.⁴³

In the *Vāseṭṭha-sutta*,⁴⁴ the Buddha argued that all men belong to one species genetically in contradistinction to different species to which various types of fauna and flora belong. This argument corresponds to the modern biological view. In the case of plants, insects, quadrupeds, serpents, fishes and birds there are many species and marks which are distinctive traits. Human beings, therefore, are fundamentally equal and on par with each other. The distinction sought to be maintained by the caste institution are arbitrary in character. "Division in the kinds of living things; for kinds divide behold the grass and tree! They reason not, yet they possess the mark after their kind, for kinds indeed divide consider then the beetles, moths and ants: They after their kind too possess the mark and so four-footed creatures, great and small...The reptiles, snakes, the long-backed animals...Fish and pond-feeders, water-dwellers...Bird and the winged creatures, fowls o' the air They after their kind all possess the mark; For kind divide. Each after his kind bears his mark; in man there is no manifold, Not in the hair or head or ears or eyes, Not in the mouth or nose or lips or brows, not in the throat, hips, belly or the back, Not in the rump, sex-organs or the back, not in the hands or feet, fingers or nails, Not in the legs or thighs, colour or voice, the mark that forms his kind as in all else. Nothing unique is in men's body found: The difference in men is nominal."⁴⁵

No doubt about it, the Buddha's teachings mentioned above, is in accord with the findings of modern biologists who exploded the doctrines of racism and would urge the biological unity of humankind in support of the concept of a common humanity. So, when Buddhism asks us to treat all men as our relatives, there seems to be a deep truth in this statement than that of a mere ethical recommendation.⁴⁶

The Buddha asserted the caste names originated as mere conventions. What business at which man works to earn a living, a livelihood, so it was named his caste. It is just a custom and definitely not a God-given structure. As custom, it could be changed too. The Buddha cited examples of how men are designated by different names according to their occupations and proved the fact with reference to the *Brāhman* community itself as the *Brāhmans* of the day used to follow various professions.

The man forsooth who earns his livelihood. By minding cows and fields, know, *Vāseṭṭha*, He is a farmer, not a *Brāhmaṇa*! Who works at

diverse crafts, know him to be an artisan and not a *Brāhmaṇa*! Who plies a trade for livelihood, know him to be a trader, not a *Brāhmaṇa*! Who toils in service for another man, know as a servant, not a *Brāhmaṇa*! Who lives by taking things not given, know him to be a thief and not a *Brāhmaṇa*! Who lives indeed by archery, know him to be a soldier, not a *Brāhmaṇa*! Who lives by priestly craft, know him to be a celebrant and not a *Brāhmaṇa*! And who owns the village, countryside, know him as a rajah and no *Brāhmaṇa*!⁴⁷

The distinction in society mainly rested on differences in the occupations of life. One, who engages in trade, came to be known as a merchant; one who indulges in military pursuits is known as a soldier, and one who administers the country as a king. It is not by birth that one becomes a merchant, soldier or king, but by actions that one performs or the job one does. The distinction is founded merely on the practice of different professions or livelihood, the basis of social stratification. The occupational skill in various branches is available to all equally. Each has responsibility for the work carried out in his field of specialization. Thus, the Buddha recognized the similarity and equality of men in physical characteristics and the differences among men were considered from the point of view of occupation. There are no inborn characteristics which justify the caste distinction. They are the result of conventions established by the people.

The Buddhist legal argument is that any individual, irrespective of his or her caste, if he/she commits an infringement of the law, will be penalized with the same kind and degree of punishment. This argument is spelt out in the *Madhura-sutta*. In this *Sutta*, the king of Madhura visited Kaccāyana, the master who was propagating the *Brāhmaṇa*'s claim to superiority over other castes in society. In his turn Kaccāyana asked the king, as he was a ruler, what he would do in the case of a noble committing the offence of a thief, or robber, or an adulterer, who was captured and sent to him. The king answered confidently that he would punish him or have him killed as a criminal. In a similar way, Kaccāyana asked if a *Brāhmaṇa*, a *Vaiśya*, or a *Śūdra* breaks the law, what would he do, and the king replied he would do the same as for the *Kṣatriya*.

What is the difference between a high caste man and a low caste man? The penal

code of the country made no distinction with regard to different castes as described above. A robber is a robber, irrespective of the caste of the accused, and he must undergo the punishment by the ruler of the realm. It is thus in the eye of the law that people stand on an equal footing and there are no privileged classes, castes or any individuals who are exempt from its provision.

The king of Madhuri finally accepted that "Indeed, good Kaccāyana, this being so, these four castes are exactly the same; I do not see any difference between them in this respect."⁴⁸ A criminal is punished by the ruler of the realm, irrespective of the caste of the accused. Similarly, according to the Buddha, if any one, a *Kṣatriya*, a *Brāhmaṇa*, a *Vaiśya* or a *Śūdras* committed murder, robbery, false-hood, slander, covetousness, adultery etc, must pass to a state of misery or woe. The same misery awaits each one who is guilty of that physically, mentally and vocally. On the other hand, it also demonstrated the fact that if any one of the four castes abstains from the crimes noted above, he passes after death to bliss and heaven without any distinction of castes. The *karmaphala* is equal for all; no one gets privileged result or excessively severe result because of his caste, high or low.

Thus, we can see clearly that caste distinction cannot assure material success in life; it cannot make any differences with regard to the punishment or happiness that awaits one after death; it can not protect wrong-doers from the penalty prescribed by law and that above all, for the homeless ascetics it is a matter of indifference. Thus, the distinction of the four castes does not exist and based on this moral judgment all people are the same before the psycho-ethical law of *Kamma*. It is one factor of the Buddhist concept of equality.

Emphasizing his message, the Buddha gave an instance that fire kindled with a piece of sandalwood by a man of so-called high birth is no different from the fire fuelled with a branch of the castor oil shrub by a man belonging to a low caste. Irrespective of the source, the fire is the same, and in the same way, whatever is the caste of a man by birth, he can have the ability for self-development to the highest degree.⁴⁹ On another occasion, the Buddha asked a *Brāhmaṇa*, who was proud of himself being a high caste, if a *Brāhmaṇa* with a back-scratcher and bath-powder in his hand, going to a river, is capable of cleaning himself of dust and mud; why not a man belonging to others castes? Consequently, the *Brāhmaṇa* accepted that: "That is not so, good

Gotama. A noble, too, good Gotama, who, taking a back-scratcher and bath-powder and going to a river, is capable of cleaning himself of dust and mud. And so is a *Brāhmaṇa*... and so is a merchant...and so is a worker, good Gotama so, good Gotama, all the four castes, taking a back-scratcher and bath-powder and going to a river, is capable of cleaning themselves of dust and mud."⁵⁰

Thus, the Buddha tried to recover the traditions, the traditions of morality which once were observed in society. All in all, we can see, he tried to provoke people to live in a moral way. For him, moral conduct is of the most vital importance to human beings not birth. Conduct alone makes a man noble or ignoble, makes him a *Brāhmaṇa* or an outcaste.

Not by birth does one become a *Brāhmaṇa*;
Not by birth does one become non-*Brāhmaṇa*;
By action one become is a *Brāhmaṇa*;
By action one becomes a non-*Brāhmaṇa*.⁵¹

To some, the Buddha was a social reformer. He was not only a liberator who fought for the equality of the caste system but also a women emancipator. Others point out that the Buddha's teachings show a misogynist doctrine and that the Buddha was a misogynist. No doubt, 'Women in Buddhism' is a large topic. Recently, there are several books devoted to discussing this topic, however, it seem to be a long standing controversial subject without a final judgment. It really deserves a separate, scholarly and earnest study. The Buddha's attitudes towards gender equality focuses on two major headings. First is the negative teaching of the Buddha about womenfolk that, more or less, was influenced by the patriarchal and hierarchical culture of the time and the asceticism that was adopted by the Buddha in his quest for liberation. Second are the rational teachings of the Buddha and their significance to womenfolk.

Looking through history, both from the scriptural aspect and practical day to day social life of the time, one sees that while Buddhism stresses the non-importance of sex for spiritual attainment and the negative consequences of strongly identifying oneself as 'male' or 'female,' it was forced to deal with the both the biological differences and the cultural setting of that time. In the Buddha's day women were

revered as mothers, but not much else and even today there are many cultural norms that place women below men, both in the spiritual life and in mundane matters. So the Buddha, in his quest to spread his teachings to all classes and genders of people needed to create a groundwork in which men and women could co-exist while fostering a spiritually supportive atmosphere.

In many early texts it is said that the Buddha not only taught women, but at times went out of his way to do so. He realized that women, too, were capable of the same spiritual transformation offered by the *Dharma*. In beginning to ordain nuns, the Buddha laid down specific rules pertaining to women to guard them against even the suspicion of sexual relations within the Buddhist communities. The Buddha recognized that the intermingling of sexes was quite likely to be difficult for those without proper mindfulness due to simple biological urges in both sexes. Many texts from that time paint woman as temptresses, 'the stain of the holy life,' to be avoided if possible, and being alone with a woman was prohibited. These texts can be seen as mere warnings to novices and potentially impulsive monks to restrain their latent urges towards women, and should not be taken as misogynist.

Later texts have added to the perceived limitations of being a woman, such as being unable to rule compassionately over a huge realm; but even these can be seen as consequences of cultural influence on Buddhism, and not adhering to known teachings of the Buddha. Certain texts even argue that while a woman may become an *Arahant*, full enlightenment (like that of the Buddha) could only be accomplished by a male. But these can be countered by knowing that enlightenment is neither male nor female. It is, like karma, beyond the confines of the human body.

The most important and continuing theme in Buddhist texts has been that sex is not an absolute determinant. It is not 'what you are' and should not be viewed as a hindrance or a help on the spiritual path. However, attachment to one's gender or indulgence in physical pleasures available to both is certainly a hindrance. Both sexes, when ordained, take the vows of celibacy, recognizing that sex, just like attachment to people or a material possession is detrimental to spiritual development. While much of Buddhism has been shaped by social circumstances (which have generally been unfavorable to women), in spiritual terms the genders have always had equal access to enlightenment.

Historically, there have been some cases where Buddhism has been greatly progressive (establishing an order of women renunciates in the 5th century BCE), but never can we see a real argument for the 'equality' of women on a grand scale. There are stories of enlightened women (the *Therīgāthā*) in the Pāli Canon. In later Buddhism, the concept of non-duality became prominent. We have stories of great *Siddhas* (accomplished ones) who were women (though only three or four out of the well-known eighty-four *mahāsiddhas*). Within non-duality, one can ask, "Is your mind male or female?" in part as a real question, but also in part to get the practitioner to stop clinging to ways of identifying him or herself. If he was teaching in present day society, it is reasonable to assume that he would use very different language and express his ideas according to 21st century understanding. That said, it must be immediately stressed that the one element which cannot change, is the core teaching.

In the framework of equality, to compare with the doctrine of No-self in the Pāli canon the Mahāyāna doctrine of Buddha nature, is believed to be the most distinguishing doctrine of Mahāyāna-sūtras about the philosophy of equality, either in society, gender or spirituality. Although Buddhism is not a branch of Brahmanism, it is a big mistake to ignore the Indian background of the Buddha when we study any aspect of Buddhist doctrine.³² The Buddha's first influences were the closely related philosophies of the teachings in the Upanishads. The Upanishadic theory is that there is an eternal self, an *Ātman*, which is an aspect of a person which is unchanging. The eternal self is attainable through meditation, and that this eternal entity is identical with the perceiver's frame of mind. The notion of an essential, enduring, and immutable "self" (*Ātman*) lying at the core of personal identity was one of the central themes of the diverse Upanishadic speculations characteristic of the Age of the Wanderers into which the Buddha was born.³³ The Buddha did not adopt that theory and was dissatisfied with that theory of eternal self. He recognized that something supposedly immutable, eternal, and uncaused could not be identical with a frame of mind, which is conditioned by meditative practices.³⁴

The single most distinctive and radical of the Buddha's teachings in the Pāli canon was the notion of the non-substantiality of the self which was delivered by the

Buddha in the *Anattalakkhaṇa-sutta* right after the first sermon, the *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta*. This notion, *anatta*, is usually rendered in English as the view of “no-self”⁵⁵ or “non-self” as a corollary of the principle of conditionality (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) and as one of the three marks of *samsāric* existence, along with impermanence (*anicca*) and unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*), the doctrine of the non-substantiality of the self lies at the very heart of the *Dhamma*.

The *Sutta* teaches us that neither within the five *khandhas*, the psycho-physical aggregates of the human mind-body process, which make up the personality of a being, nor outside of them, can be found anything as a self-existing real ego-entity or self. The first and simplest of the five is the form, *rūpa*. Although not exactly equivalent to “matter” this may be thought of as denoting the physical substance of the body. In Buddhist term, *rūpa* constitutes the four great elements, i.e., earth, water, fire wind and their derivatives.⁵⁶ *Rūpa* is afflicted with cold, heat, hunger, thirst, flies, mosquitoes, wind, sun, and reptiles.⁵⁷ It is the cause, condition and the delineation of the four great elements.⁵⁸ The second of the five categories is feeling or *vedanā*. It denotes the capacity to respond affectively to a stimulus. It is feeling born of contact with eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind.⁵⁹ Feelings are classified as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral and the most basic kind of feeling is simple sensation of the stimulus response kind.⁶⁰

So far *rūpa*, *vedanā* and *saññā* sketch a picture which still lack any reference to the features which distinguish one person from another. An additional element constitutes the fourth category, *saṅkhāra*. It is volition regarding form, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensation, and mental phenomena.⁶¹ *Saṅkhāra* constructs constructed forms, feelings, perceptions, volitional formation and consciousness.⁶² The fifth category, *viññāṇa*, is usually translated as “consciousness.” *Viññāṇa* consist of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind-consciousness. The experience of *viññāṇa* as a stream of mental consciousness, however, is merely one of its many modes. *viññāṇa* is understood as functioning at a deeper level as that which animates an organism. It is by *viññāṇa* we see, hear, taste, touch and think; and recognize what is sour, bitter, pungent, sweet, sharp, mild, salty, and bland.⁶³ Moreover, *viññāṇa* has an important function in relation to death and rebirth.⁶⁴ Following death, *viññāṇa* fuses with a new biological form giving rise to a being with a new physical body but a karmic profile

carried over from a previous life.⁶⁵ Lastly, regarding the *khandhas* as no-self is the way to arahantship and liberation, the Buddha said: “*Casting away all the āsavas, one attains arahantship.*”⁶⁶

Buddha nature would empower the individual to take actions in order to improve his or her own life and the lives of all humankind and that would lead to the establishment of universal harmony and peace. The awareness of our Buddha nature may be the single greatest attribute towards the abolishing of ethnic conflicts and discriminations in the world. Once the nature of one's life is understood then one can begin to understand the relationship of the self to others, and the self to the universe. This is the difference between an enlightened person who seeks peace and one who gropes and stumbles in the darkness creating havoc and chaos all around as we have seen happening around the world recently.

The Buddha stated that although manifold indeed are the species of living beings, there are no such sub-divisions among human beings:

Among men difference is spoken of as a matter of designation. Hence, the Buddha continued explaining how racist and sexist theories feed on the average person's ignorance and deluded perception of social reality. When a group engaged in the same occupation from generation to generation, the illusion arose that a person was a farmer, a merchant, warrior or a priest by birth. It was because a person practiced agriculture that we call him a farmer and not a merchant, a ruler or a priest. Then the same thing is said of various occupations, such as, craftsman, merchant, servant, fighting man, sacrificer and king.⁶⁷

From the Buddha's point of view, every just social order must begin by recognizing the common species nature of all human beings. There is no basis for discrimination between human beings before the natural law, either individually or collectively. This law is not a social convention or positive legislation enacted by an authority. It is inferred through insight into the conditioned co-genesis of perceived differences. In conclusion, the *Vāseṭṭha-sutta* and *Aggañña-sutta* together provided the basic principles for a formulation of a bill of fundamental human rights: all men and women are equal according to the universal law.

Discussing human right in Mahāyāna Buddhism, David W. Chappell holds the idea that: "the thirty articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights have a remarkable parallel to the threefold morality of Mahāyāna Buddhism: do no evil, cultivate good and save all beings."⁶⁸ Significantly Mahāyāna *bodhisattva* precepts apply to all, encourage universal compassion, care for the sick and treat all people, including enemies, as family relatives. Beside the suggestion of David W. Chappell, we can see, as discussed in the second portion of this chapter, that the doctrine of the Buddha-nature in Mahāyāna Buddhism contribute to the fundamental argument of human rights. The Buddhist believes that discrimination, inequality or ethnic conflict will not disappear by instituting rules to forbid them. They will end when each individual becomes aware of his or her 'Buddha-nature' and share the 'Buddha-nature' with all human kind.

In the discourse at Mathurā, a king hears that a Buddhist monk whom he calls the ascetic Mahākaccāyana is living near by. He goes to him and asks what he thinks of the sentiments expressed by the *Brāhmaṇas* as the *Brāhmaṇas* are the best class and heirs of Brahṁā.⁶⁹ Mahākaccāyana replies that this is just something people say, utterance in the world and in elucidation he give four arguments to persuade the king that the four classes are exactly the same. An individual from any of the four classes can, with money, employ anyone from any of the four classes as a servant.⁷⁰ Secondly, good behavior or bad behaviour leads one to heaven or hell, as the case may be and in the present life, if anyone from any class commits crimes such as burglary or adultery, the king punishes him, by execution, banishment, etc. Thus, the previous designation Kṣatriya or brāhmaṇa disappear and he is reckoned simply a criminal.⁷¹ Here, the notion of Buddhist equality before the law is very clear that all individuals, whatever his or her position in society, are punished with the same kind and degree of punishment, if held liable for an infringement of the law. Discussing equality before the law in the Buddhist doctrine, G. P. Malalasekera and K. N. Jayatilleke said that: "Buddhism recognizes the importance of equality before the law...the law is expected to serve the best interests of the entire society, with no privileges or immunities being granted to any specially favoured segment thereof; inequalities, such as laying heavier burdens on the poor, are never sanctioned."⁷² As mentioned above, in the Buddhist attitude to social revolution, the ruler who is the real dispenser of the law is actually *primus inter pares*, i.e., first among equals, in

that all human beings, including himself, are equal. Thus, the king himself is not above the law.⁷⁵

Regarding equality before the law, Buddhist ethics emphasize on the mind, not only on action either verbal or physical. According to the Buddhist doctrine of *Kamma*, no one can escape the effects of what he has done. What is to come will come sooner or later, when the effect of the action becomes mature.⁷⁶ 'Causes and effects' is the universal law, natural law. One is heir to one's actions irrespective of any factors as race, colour, national or social origin, property, birth or status. Whenever the Buddha was questioned about discrimination in the society of his time, he always asserted that if anyone irrespective of his position in society committed an immoral act he would definitely get the result in unhappiness and if anyone does a good act he would get the due reward.

In society, according to the Buddha, the occupation of the people can be changed. He did not accept the idea of fitting occupation to a person based on his or her birth or whatever. He showed us that such a belief was just a convention. Regulating a person's occupation based on his or her social position, according to the Buddha, is like a person being forced to eat a piece of flesh and pay for his eating which he does not want to do⁷⁷. Unlike Brahmanism, in the Buddhist doctrine, social status and position can be changed and this is universal. In the discourse with Assalāyana, the Buddha persuades the eponymous *Brāhmaṇas* to agree that purity belongs to all four classes, in opposition to the notion that *Brāhmaṇas* are the best class etc. he does this by means of a long series of arguments. We are told that *Brāhmaṇa* women give birth in the normal way; and so the *Brāhmaṇas* are not born of Brahma. The second is that in Yona and Kamboja and other neighbouring areas there are only two classes, masters and slaves, and that these positions can be reversed.⁷⁸ The regulating occupation is a local and contingent arrangement. It is not a universal existent.

In the discourse at Mathurā, we are told that, if an individual from any class leaves home for homelessness, and lives virtuously, the king salutes him respectfully, rises up from his seat for him, supports him materially and affords him protection. The king does not discriminate with regard to his social position.⁷⁹ This matter of equality of opportunity is assured repeatedly in the reply of the Buddha when he was asked about discrimination.

Buddhist doctrine guarantees opportunity for any individual, but of course, the term is not the same as the western term. The highest happiness, according to the Buddhist doctrine, is the liberation from the suffering world and that is the destination of anyone who tries to walk on the path without any discrimination with regard to race, sex, colour, social position etc.⁷⁸ Arguing from the reality of free will and the capacity that man has within himself of becoming either moral or immoral or even happy or unhappy by transforming himself or degenerating morally as the case may be, the Buddha denied that there are such fixed human types genetically determined. There are no men who are intrinsically good or evil by nature and must necessarily remain so, for the evil can turn into good and the good degenerate into evil...the emphasis is not on what a man is born with, but what he does with himself, since men, irrespective of his physical constitution and psychological nature at birth, can use opportunity and with effort change for better or worse.⁷⁹

In the history of Buddhism, in its original soil and in other countries where the Buddha's teaching spread, the Buddhist missions never went with aggression like an expeditionary army. There was no blood shed by the propagation of Buddhism. Even in the field of culture, the Buddhist doctrine always respects the value of culture wherever it enters a foreign land. There is no attempt to demolish the existent culture where the Buddha's teaching spread. Respecting all living beings and keeping a way from violence are recognized as the most distinguishing features of Buddhism. It is completely in accord with the spirit of the first article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that one should act towards one another in a spirit of brother-hood.

As we all know, the first step to be a Buddhist is the taking upon oneself the vow to observe the five principle precepts. According to Peter Harvey, the five precepts imply a code of behaviour and responsibility for the right treatment of others, whether they are humans or animals. A basic principle of Buddhist ethics is that all beings are alike in disliking pain and in wanting to be happy, so that we should not inflict on another being what we would not like done to ourselves. We have a duty to others to respect their interest, and a duty to ourselves not to coarsen ourselves by abusing others.⁸⁰

When one approaches the Buddhist doctrine of interdependence one can recognize

that there is a mutual interdependent nature of relationship between one and others, then one will be able to understand the Buddhist spirit of equality. One owes one's existence to the existence of others all around one and therefore one owes a great respect to others. Secondly, humility leads to the deflation of the self and that takes one towards the realization of selflessness.

No doubt, the Buddhist doctrine recognizes the differences between human beings in society. They are endowed differently because of their *Kamma*, not through the action of any super divine power, and their *Kamma* can be changed for the better if one tries to enhance one's life. They are the owners of their dignity. L. P. N. Perera assures us that human beings were not the creation of a Creator. They are subject only to non-deterministic causal law, and their destinies are therefore in their own hands. The freedom of human beings commencing from their birth itself, and the recognition of their equality in dignity and rights are reflected clearly in the Buddha's emphasis on self-reliance.¹¹

To sum up, I may say that the Buddhist outlook incorporates the notion of equality for all people and peoples, despite the problems posed by a conceptual analysis of the word. Indeed, the Buddhist vision of the "good society" suggests that, although people would necessarily have different skills and abilities, different natures and personalities, they would all be interested in the common good, and that common good is inclusive of all people. Equality is unequivocally evident and in fact all human beings on this planet share the same common humanity regardless of colour, sex, race, nation and individual differences. If there is one area in which equality should ideally obtain, it is in the inherent dignity and value of each human being on the face of the earth, though, as we know, there are individuals whose dignity and value become somewhat diminished in the light of their actions. We know that within *samsāra*, there is no possibility of duplication or identical repletion but as humans, we laugh, cry, have hopes and fears, joys, and disappointments. Remembering this common humanity we should encourage respect for the liberty of others to live their own lives according to their own perspectives, providing that one does not violate in any way the well-being of others. By this principle, one treats others with equality of respect despite the inequalities in their various characters. Recognizing this fact should act as a spur to compassionate effort, when such is called for, not to callous indifference and thus Buddhist ethics rest on this deduction from the observed facts