



# ASEAN Integration: Human Dignity and Responsibility to Humanity from a Buddhist Perspective

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## **Abstract**

Human beings, as individuals, are free to choose their own course of action for achieving liberation. Humans are a mindful species, and as such: human responsibilities and human rights should complement, not supersede one another. Emphasizing social and moral responsibility must not lead to a removal of that basic intuition of human rights that seeks legal protection for the individual's freedom of self-determination. On the other hand this right cannot prevail without any limitations. It finds its limits - as already stated in the Human Rights Declaration from 1948 - at the right of others and "the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare". Community wellbeing must not be cashed by unfettered individual liberty. This is the basis and foundation for the mindful development of a healthy and sustainable integrated ASEAN community.

*Keywords:* **ASEAN**, Human Dignity, Buddhist perspective

## Introduction

The celebration of human freedom runs through Buddhist practices, institutions, and doctrines. Human beings, as individuals, are free to choose their own course of action for achieving liberation. Religious teachings should not prevent human beings from taking individual action for their liberation.

Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserts: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”<sup>1</sup> <sup>2</sup> The Buddhist view of human rights and religious liberty arises from the conviction that human beings are born with complete freedom and responsibility.

The historical Buddha strongly affirmed that human beings have their destiny in their hands. Emphasizing self reliance in each individual, human equality in dignity and rights is clearly recognized. Buddhist texts such as the *Sampasadaniya Suttanta* stress the importance of personal effort, human endeavor, strength, and responsibility. Buddhahood itself is open to all human beings without any limitation.

The fundamental Buddhist ethical principle that underpins the concept of human rights is that “all life forms have a basic desire to safeguard themselves.” This ethical perspective gives validity and strength to the principle of universal love (*mettā*) advocated by all Buddhists. Buddhist texts assert this crucial ethical standpoint in various ways: for example, the *Dhammapada* states that “all beings desire happiness” (10:3) and that “life is dear to all living beings” (10:2). This Buddhist ethical position further proposes to “compare one’s situation with that of another and avoid resorting to violence” and depriving another of its right to life. From this Buddhist perspective, the ideal life is one in which one lives “with friendliness and compassion towards all beings”.<sup>3</sup>

As in many other world religions, there is no doubt that Buddhist teachings also can be drawn to support the view that religious liberty is firmly grounded on a conception of the dignity of the human person. In addition, however, Buddhist doctrines maintain that the free exercise of “will” is the key for both material and spiritual wellbeing of the human person, who is “free to choose and open to seek” an individual program of religious regimen that enables each individual to taste the fruit of liberation.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>

<sup>2</sup> Digha Nikaya III: 113

<sup>3</sup> Digha Nikaya I: 70

The best illustration of this unconditional acceptance and recognition of liberty and human freedom is found in the *Kalama Sutta*<sup>4 5</sup>. Here the Buddha advises on how one should design their religious enquiry by transcending any biases that come into play when human persons make critical decisions in adopting a religious tradition or practice. The historical Buddha advised the *Kalamas* (a group of critically-minded people) “not to accept anything on the grounds of revelation, tradition, or hearsay,” not to “accept because they are mentioned in the collections of the scriptures or because they are based on reasoning or because they are in accordance with logical arguments or because they conform with one’s own preconceived notions or because of inadequate reflection on them or because they fit to a context or because of the prestige of your teacher.”<sup>4</sup> The historical Buddha’s provoking statement here is an illustration of religious freedom that the Buddha himself advocated in relation to his own teachings as well as those of other religious teachers.

The Buddha recognized the importance of living, working, and cooperating with all human beings in an integrated society. Compassionate attitudes extended towards others and non-violent values translated into positive mental, physical, and social actions are extremely important for religious harmony and social progress. One’s spirituality depends on and is enhanced by a positive contribution of the other.

A healthy, open, and conducive environment, in which ideas and practices can be studied, discussed, critiqued, and appropriated for positive human action in the wider community is absolutely essential for modern democracies. In the *Parinibbana Sutta* the Buddha outlined seven conditions for community growth, which are:

- hold well-attended gatherings frequently
- assemble and disperse peacefully
- enact or repeal laws constitutionally
- respect and seek the counsel of elders
- uphold the honor of women and maidens
- respect and honor existing places of worship as their forefathers have done, and
- protect and honor the holy ones.

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<sup>4</sup>AnguttaraNikaya: 189

<sup>5</sup>Digha Nikaya II: 74-75

## Facilitating between extremes

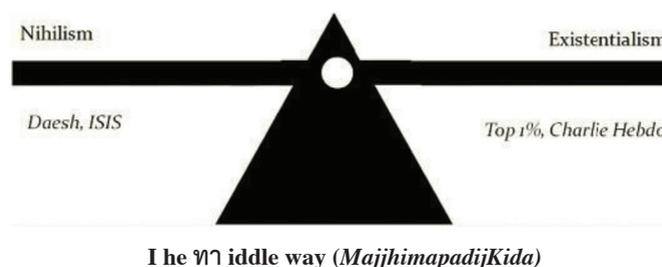
One of the core philosophical tenets of Buddhism in fact is to avoid taking position of extremes. The Buddha Himself is a product of extreme conditioning. He was a Prince, wealthy and luxuriant, before deciding to give it all up to become a practicing ascetic. Doing so, he starved himself to the point of death. Only then did he realize that salvation is found neither in luxury nor self annihilation, but to cultivate a balance, or centeredness in practice.

In this, He expounded the *Middle-Way (Majjhimapadipada)*, the path of enlightenment that spurns both the extremes of *nihilism* and *existentialism*. The Buddha advises against personal cultivation up to the point of personal destruction (the anti-social stance) and wanton materialism (the anti-spiritual stance). The well rounded individual, as Buddhism espouses, is one who takes upon him or herself the personal liberty to advance spiritually while maintaining a mindful circumspection of society at large.

As discussed earlier, a healthy individual is predicated upon a healthy community, and vice versa. If a community allows for the development of mindful and contemplative individuals - i.e. in terms of spiritual substance rather than outward forms of religiosity - such individuals in return can help to nurture the evolution of a community which encourage conducive environments that supports spiritual development.

Such evolved communities by their natural tendencies can play a role in putting a check into destructive elements from taking hold - elements forewarned by the Buddha as destructive to human and society endeavor such as greed, hatred and ignorance (the three evil roots).

It is not surprising that today's clamor for religiosity in general has heightened because of the perceived threat of wanton capitalism and unfettered openness. In some ways, religious extremism and the rising face of terror, is somewhat linked to this ubiquitous display of unlimited liberties. It can even be said now that what we are seeing is the confrontation of one extreme with another, that is, the clash of nihilism and existentialism.



## **The Buddha advises against personal cultivation up to the point of personal destruction (the anti-social stance) and wanton materialism (the anti-spiritual stance).**

On one hand, we have people who would be driven to destroy their lives to make a point - such as *Daesh* or *ISIS*<sup>6</sup> On their other hand, there is the tactless and materially driven culture, promoting gross vulgarity in the name of free speech, such as those demonstrated by the equally crude and immoral *Charlie Hebdo*<sup>7</sup> publishers.

### **Asian Values and Human Rights**

Such views lead US to the centre of what in the international human rights debate of the last years has come to be known under the term “Asian-Values”. During the nineties political leaders of various Asian states, headed by Malaysia and Singapore and markedly supported by China, have repeatedly criticized the human rights idea as being too Western and contended in particular that the individualism on which it is based is opposed to the community oriented “Asian Values.”<sup>8</sup>

For some countries like China, Vietnam, Myanmar and others it is only too obvious that this argument is used in order to distract from considerable violations of

human rights within their own states or for withdrawing them from international criticism.

And yet, without doubt, this is not the last word on the topic of “Human Rights and Asian Values”. Underlying some of the Asian voices is the genuine concern that a liberal individualistic ethos in conjunction with a legalistic, aggressive and consumerist attitude does not meet traditional values of Asian societies, that is, values such as social harmony, respect for family and authorities and in particular emphasis on duty and responsibility rather than on claimable rights.

Such concerns should not easily be dismissed. The Indian-British scholar of political science, Bhikhu Parekh, has rightly pointed out that on the one hand emphasizing “Asian Values” “... is vulnerable to the collectivist danger and unlikely to create a culture conducive

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<sup>6</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic\\_state\\_of\\_Iraq\\_and\\_the\\_Levant](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic_state_of_Iraq_and_the_Levant)

<sup>7</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charlie\\_Hebdo](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charlie_Hebdo)

<sup>8</sup>[http://hmb.utoronto.ca/HMB303H/weeklv\\_supp/week-02/Langlois\\_Asian\\_Values.rtf](http://hmb.utoronto.ca/HMB303H/weeklv_supp/week-02/Langlois_Asian_Values.rtf)

to the development of individuality and choice”, but that on the other hand a one sided liberal stress on rights is hardly able “to nurture the spirit of community and social responsibility”. To my mind this statement marks a good starting- point for understanding that both sides - the representatives of “Asian Values” and the defenders of a “Western Liberalism” - could learn from one another and in a sense complement each other.<sup>9</sup>

But - and this “but” is very crucial - not on exactly the same level, that is not on the legal level of those minimal protective rights, which shall guard the freedom of the individual against the force of powerful communities and institutions! It is true that emphasizing such individual protective rights is not enough for promoting moral sensitivity and social responsibility. Responsibility exceeds that what can be secured legally.

For this reason it makes a lot of sense to mindfully identify in addition to the Declaration of Human Rights: an intercultural and inter-religious basis for a Declaration of Human Responsibilities as it is intended within the context of “global ethics”.

## **Conclusion**

Humans are a mindful species, and as such: human responsibilities and human rights should complement, not supersede one another. Emphasizing social and moral responsibility must not lead to a removal of that basic intuition of human rights that seeks legal protection for the individual’s freedom of self-determination. On the other hand this right cannot prevail without any limitations. It finds its limits - as already stated in the Human Rights Declaration from 1948 - at the right of others and “the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare”. Community wellbeing must not be crushed by unfettered individual liberty. This is the basis and foundation for the mindful development of a healthy and sustainable integrated ASEAN community.

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<sup>9</sup>Bhikhu C. Parekh, “Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory”, Harvard University Press, 2002