



Justice in the *Tipitaka*

Channarong Boonnoon¹

Abstract

The objective of this research is to study concepts of “justice” and “social justice” in Pali *Tipitaka*, Theravada’s essential texts, under two main directions: (1) a study of the concept “moral justice” that appears in the teachings on the law of *karma* and rebirth to find out whether it can be a basis of “social justice”; (2) an inquiry into the concept “social justice” from Buddhist teachings on society and state in the *Suttas*, and the *Vinayas*, which formally govern the monastery (the *sangha*).

The study indicates that Buddhism accepts two conceptions of justice, i.e. universal and social. The former, based on the Buddha’s teachings on *karma*, states that a moral law exists and governs the realization of sequences of behavior in proportion to their deeds. This law functions dynamically and causally beyond human’s understandings. Descriptive orientation and theoretical complexity of the teachings impedes its explanatory and evaluative application to social relations. The latter, founded on the Buddha’s

¹ Channarong Boonnoon is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts, Silpakorn University, Thailand.



sociopolitical teachings, focuses on immediate life situations. Believing that individual and society, as well as citizens and state-power structure, are interrelated; and that “All humans desire a good life that is made possible in a just society,” Buddhism employs human basic features as main criteria for an arrangement of systems to distribute goods and wrongs. The study proposes that justice rooted in sociopolitical context leading itself to application to general society is more applicable and beneficial than justice defined by the law of *karma*.

Keywords: social justice, moral justice, karma



Introduction

As this article is a development of the research paper titled “Justice in the Tipitaka” as part of the Thai Humanities Forum Project supported by the Thailand Research Fund in 2007, the article follows the structure of the paper and is divided into four parts: (1) background, significance, objective and methodology of the research regarding the concept of justice in Buddhism; (2) a summary of the research findings; (3) the Buddhist perspective of justice; and (4) Suggestions that may be useful for future research in Buddhism and society.²

Background, Significance, Objective and Methodology of the Research

Justice is one of society’s basic values, which binds the society together. It is a moral and political word claimed by philosophers to have a universal significance and an important role in political and social theories. Although presently regarded as less significant than human rights, justice is part of every legal system, which encompasses the public life. It is a social and political concept in

² As this article is a development of the research paper titled “Justice in the Tipitaka” as part of the Thai Humanities Forum Project supported by the Thailand Research Fund (from March 15, 2005 to June 14, 2007), I would like to thank the Thailand Research Fund and Professor Suwanna Satha-Anand, Head of the Thai Humanities Forum Project. Part of this article (Chapter 4) is published in the *Journal of Buddhist Studies Chulalongkorn University*, 17/2, May- August 2010: 36-95. The entire article has not been published in any academic journal.



the sense that if we were alone, the question whether our action is just would be meaningless, but it becomes meaningful when we interact with each other, from a single person up to the levels of the community, society, nation or international relations (Promta, 1995). Justice becomes an important factor when we talk about the legitimacy to govern, or when we use it to oppose a government that we believe illegitimate. States would use justice in order to legitimize their rights to govern, and citizens would use it to claim their rights to oppose or deny states' authorities. In this respect, justice becomes the basic requirement in order to prove an authority's legitimacy. Apart from this, it is also used to demonstrate the highest ideals regarding forms of social relationships in idealized societies such as Plato's Republic and the communist state and society (Campell, 2001).

Some argue that justice is a public and political virtue, only related to actions and goals of the state or agents of the state, public activities, laws and policies, outside the private sphere, and unrelated to the economy and the family. I find this view somewhat incorrect because within the family, groups of friends, societies, volunteers, the court and the government, we often find justice and injustice. The issue of justice may not be the most important objective in these institutions and some may regard it as relevant only in the public sphere. However, feminist scholars argue for the importance of justice in the private sphere, for example, in relationships within the family and between men and women.



Some hold the view that justice is an absolute command, something that is intrinsically right and unrelated to its consequences. It is a norm without an exception. A value that neither deviates nor connects to any interests. This view affirms that justice must be fully received before any other goals or values. Justice is the most important virtue and higher than any other virtues. However, others view justice as one among many virtues. In some circumstances, such as those outside of politics and law, justice should be given a less prominent status in order to allow for other values or virtues, such as freedom and loyalty, to come to the fore. Some also hold that justice is related to the distribution of interests or due compensations more than equality (Campell, 2001).

Justice is used as a concept to evaluate relationships between individuals, between individuals and states, and between states. It plays an important role in political ideologies. Different ideologies conceive justice differently. It is not only a legal, but also a moral concept behind ideologies or human social structures, and refers to universal principles, the natural law, or the formation of a society. It is seen as a political and social invention.

In recent years, there has been an increase in attempts to reinterpret the teachings of Buddhism in relations to new economic, political and social situations. As new situations arise, scholars of Buddhism find interpretations that are limited



to the scope of individualism, ones that only emphasize individual goodness, as not providing satisfactory adaptations to contemporary society, and provide sufficient alternatives to ideas already present in Western thoughts and cultures. Buddhist teachings have tendencies towards empiricist forms of epistemology, atheism and naturalism in providing answers to various issues without resorting to supernatural powers. Its views regarding righteousness, morality and social justice are regarded by some as more satisfactory than answers that appeal to an omnipotent God, which are regarded as less compatible with contemporary Western thoughts. The study of the Buddhist view of "justice" is therefore not only significant in the field of Buddhist Studies, but to the quest for the meaning of "just society." Buddhism may be able to provide alternative answers for those who are interested in questions regarding social justice and justice under a legal system, especially in the case of Thailand which has Buddhism as its cultural roots. In examining this question, this research hopes that Thai society will gain a significant "body of knowledge" for the development of the idea of social justice in the future. The study and conclusions derived from this research aim to provide a starting point in the analysis of justice in the Pali *Tipitaka* and other Theravada Buddhist scriptures, and hope to stimulate further discussions and developments in the field. The two main points examined in this paper are: firstly, whether the concept of moral justice in the teachings of *karma* and rebirths can be used as basic principles of social justice; and secondly, to better understand the concept of Buddhist "social justice"



in the teachings regarding the state and society in the *Suttas*, and the *Vinaya* monastic rules. Its hypothesis is that the Buddhist teaching of *karma*, which demonstrates the concept of a universal “moral justice,” cannot be used as a foundation of social justice. For not only *karmic* justice poses epistemological problems, it also does not provide any criteria to determine injustice. Other social and political thoughts in Buddhism must also be considered to further analyze this concept.

This paper analyzes important *suttas* in the Pali *Tipitaka*, *Atthakatha*, *Tika*, other important Buddhist scriptures, and contemporary scholarly works in the fields of philosophy of religion and social philosophy both in Thai and English, to provide an understanding of the basic thoughts of Buddhism. This is aimed at formulating the ideas of Buddhist “justice,” “moral justice” and “social justice” and to provide further analyses of the related topics of social structures, the state, and roles of the state, focusing on two particular issues, namely, the justice of punishments, and the justice of social distribution of interests. In providing these summaries and analyses, the researcher also takes into account the social, cultural and historical contexts of Buddhism and its teachings. It is hoped that this research will add to the body of knowledge regarding the Buddhist perspectives of “justice” and “social justice” within the fields of social and political philosophy, and stimulates further discussions and research in the areas of Buddhist social philosophy and governance.



Research Summary

This paper argues that the concept of “moral justice” in the teachings of *karma* and rebirths cannot provide the foundations for social justice. This does not mean that Buddhism does not accept the idea of universal moral justice or *karmic* justice, but universal moral justice poses many philosophical problems when applied to the concept of social justice, as shall be shown as follows.

I. Universal justice

Buddhism holds that all things are interconnected and causally related to two ways: (1) things being the conditions for the arising of other things, i.e. the process of origination (*Samudayavara*), and (2) their cessations causing the cessations of other things, i.e. the process of cessation (*Nirodhavara*). This is the natural law that controls the process of all objects, matters, living beings, minds, actions (*karma*), etc. They are all subjected to the law of arising and cessation, but only the mental process and action (*karma*) are directly relevant to human beings. The mental process functions according to the law of ‘*Cittaniyama*’, consisting of consciousness, perception, thought, and volition, which condition the character of the mind positively or negatively and in turn influence verbal and bodily actions. Human action and its consequence are governed by the law of *Kammaniyama* (*karma*). *Kammaniyama* determines the karmic result of each action. Thus, according to the Buddhist perspective, there are laws of causes



and effects that govern the whole universe. These laws control nature and human lives. As individuals, human beings interact with other human beings, animate and inanimate objects mentally, verbally and physically. The laws of causes and effects determine that they always take responsibility over their intended mental, verbal and bodily actions. Each action comes with an inevitable responsibility. Whoever causes *karma*, he/she shall bear its consequences (Phra Dhammapitaka [P. A. Payutto], 1995a, 1995b, 1998; Promta, 2000).

In the Buddhist perspective, the nature of all things proceeds in two directions: the way leading to suffering and the way leading to the cessation of suffering (supreme happiness or *Nibbana*). Human actions also proceed in these two directions. When human beings perform mental, verbal and bodily actions with the intention or motivation to cause suffering, these actions will result in their future suffering in the present or the future lives. On the contrary, mental, verbal and bodily actions performed with good intentions will result in future happiness and even the cessation of suffering. This Buddhist principle of action can be summed up as 'whoever performs good karma will receive good results and whoever performs evil karma will receive bad results.' It is a law that demonstrates the relationship between action and its natural consequence, a law that can neither be interfered with nor altered by any human or superhuman powers.

Buddhism emphasizes the intention behind each action and



considers intention as *karma*, or action that has a moral value. The mind or consciousness, which reflects a human being's identity and freewill, is the first factor that determines whether an action is good or evil. The second and third factors are the outward action that follows the initial intention and the immediate effect of that action. All of these factors determine the *karmic* results. When a *karmic* result will bear its fruit depends on others related factors. Because of the various minor factors that affect *karma* coming to its fruition (*Vipaka*), *karmic* results of actions are different in every situation (Phra Dhammapitaka [P. A. Payutto], 1995a; Na Rangsi, 2000).

With regard to justice, *karma* ensures that any action that arises from freewill will inevitably bear its consequence. One is directly responsible for one's past actions. They are the factors that determine one's present mental states, characters, life situations and social environments. Regardless of one's personal preference or awareness of its existence, *karma* will provide a result that is appropriate to its cause. It determines that every action that has a moral value leads to an inescapable responsibility in the form of situations and environments that one is involved in or encounters. These responsibilities are sometimes extended into other temporal dimensions, i.e. *karma*'s fruition in one's future lives and realms. In this sense, *karma* is related to the teaching of "rebirth," a concept employed to ensure universal justice. For if one does not reap the fruit of one's karma in this life, one will surely reap its fruit in one's future existence (Satha-Anand, 2002).



In conclusion, Buddhism accepts the idea of universal justice or justice as a universal law applied to the whole universe. It is variously termed as *karmic* justice, moral justice, or natural justice.

II. Problems Regarding *Karmic* Justice

In my analysis of the related philosophical and religious literatures, the following issues must be considered when attempting to explain the concepts of *karma*, rebirth and universal moral justice in relation to actual human experience.³

- (1) The inner workings of karma are beyond human cognition. The law of *kammaniyama* is a mysterious system, beyond the understanding of ordinary human beings. Its incomprehensible nature makes it impossible for us to clearly explain moral situations that occur in the society. We can only hypothesize and put our faith in the *Tathagata*.
- (2) The complexity of *karma* and *karmic* results: There are many types of *karma* and conditions that determine its timings, functions and graveness of its results. Even though the concept of rebirths may ensure future *karmic* fruition, it is impossible to determine exactly the specific time and place of each result. As our lives in *samsara* have no beginnings, we cannot use any ordinary methods in determining the cause of

³ For more details on these issues, see Kaufman, Whitley R.P. (2005), Reichenback, Bruce R. (1990), Wright, S. Dale (1994) and Suwanna Satha-Anand (2002).



each specific happiness and suffering, and thus cannot evaluate its justice.

(3) Results of *karma* can be divided into two types: interior results and external results. Interior results are related to the mental conditions and characters of an individual. There is a clear relationship between this type of results and the moral conditions of an individual. However, that is not to say that moral and immoral individuals' ways of lives must always be outwardly different or make different impacts on the surrounding environment and the society. Exterior results, on the other hand, are related to the environment, time, outward appearance and moral characters of an individual. With regard to them, there seems to be no clear relationship between this type of results and moral actions. As external results are precarious and depend on other related social conditions, it is impossible to determine which aspects of an individual are *karmic* results and which aspects the results of other conditions and whether or not an individual has received *karmic* justice in a given situation. Some would argue that as there is no proof of such justice occurring, the universality of this aspect of *karma* must be regarded as nonexistent.

(4) The acceptance of human inequality: The guarantee of *karmic* justice through rebirth allows for an acceptance and view of human inequality as appropriate and just. As *karma* is seen as the result of individuals' past actions, social disparities are seen as normal, even though these disparities



may have been caused by other factors unrelated to moral actions such as social development and political structures. If one concedes that every situation is the result of past *karma*, one would tend to ignore social inequality and regard it as well-deserved.

- (5) The individualism of *karma*: *Karma* together with rebirth are sometimes viewed as an individualistic process and exist more in other temporal dimensions than the present. This perception of *karma* as unrelated to its social dimensions causes one to view human suffering as individualistic. This leads to a tendency to isolate oneself from others' happiness and suffering, not to interfere with them. One tends to view one's duty as to cause good *karma* for oneself and others' dispositions as the result of past actions that cannot be altered: 'Human beings are heirs to their own *karma*, their past actions determine all their present circumstances.'
- (6) The law of *karma* and its workings are consistent, mechanical and unbiased. It has no other purpose than to follow its own rules. If we always get what we deserve, then, we cannot ask others for any sympathy and compassion. For attempting to defy *karma* out of loving-kindness and compassion would also be attempting to defy the principle of universal moral justice. Acts of loving-kindness and compassion can, therefore, be restricted by this view of *karma* and the bringing about of social justice can be seen as defying *karma* and causing injustice.



(7) Adapting the teachings of *karma* to encompass its social dimensions: As human beings are born within a society, their social surroundings, communities and environments determine their choices, characters and social behaviors. The process of *karma* is, therefore, not limited to individual actions, but encompasses social conditions both past and present. When *karma* is viewed in this context, and linked to an interpretation of the teaching of Dependent Origination (*paticcasamuppada*), justice can be extended beyond the scope of an individual, and applied to present situations without necessarily resorting to future lives and realms. However, these concepts still pose problems in determining injustice in a situation, as every situation could be viewed by *karma* as equally just.

In conclusion, although universal justice and moral justice based on the teaching of *karma* are important concepts in Buddhism, applying these concepts to social phenomena to determine social and individual justice proves a complex procedure. For the workings of *karma* are complex, the consistency of its system inexplicable and beyond the capacity of ordinary human knowledge. It is a law that has descriptive, not normative, characteristics, and poses difficulties in evaluating and determining injustice.

Thus the teaching of *karma* poses problems in evaluating “justice” from the perspective of ordinary human understanding.



What Buddhist teaching should, then, be used instead? Which principle is to be used as a basis of justice, one that would enable it to rationally explain and evaluate human social relations? The second part of this research shall examine this issue.

III. Social Justice⁴

As *karma* has descriptive rather than normative characteristics, *karmic* moral justice cannot be used as a basis of social justice. However, one should not abandon the natural law of cause and effect altogether, for this law serves as a foundation of ethics, and the relationships between cause and effect of an action, in particular, can be used to determine the meaning of social justice.

⁴ Views summarized in this section are based on information from the Pali *Tipitaka*, *Jatakas* and the commentaries, together with interpretations of contemporary Thai scholars of Buddhism. Regarding Buddhist ethics, I rely on Phra Dhammapitaka's (P.A. Payutto, 1995b), Phra Ratchaworamuni's (Prayudh Payutto, 1985) and Somporn Promta's (2005) explanations of Buddhist truth and ethics. Regarding the issue of the state and the ideal ruler, I rely on an interpretation of various stories and teachings in the *Sutta Pitaka*, for example, *Agganna Sutta*, *Cakkavatti Sutta*, together with an interpretation of Mavis Fenn (1995), David R. Loy (2000) and Pricha Changkhwanyuen (1992 and 1999). Social justice is examined in relations to two kinds of state activities: 1. justice in a punishment and 2. justice in the distribution of social benefits. The first kind is an interpretation of the concept of punishment in the *Vinaya Pitaka*, the ideas of morality (*sila*) and unwholesome courses of action (*akusala-kamma-patha*). The second kind is an interpretation of *Kutadanta Sutta*, *Singalaka Sutta*, the *Jatakas*, and the views of Wira Somboon (1989 and 2002) and Abhichai Pantasen (2001). The conclusion to this section is based on the combination of these sources and perspectives.



Buddhism uses *karmic* cause and effect to evaluate an action. If the result of an action is in accordance with the principle of 'do good deeds and good things will happen, do bad deeds and bad things will happen,' then, Buddhism would consider it a just result and coherent with its cause. Justice, in this sense, is defined as 'proceeding in accordance with the natural law of cause and effect,' and as 'reaping the consequence (or benefits) appropriate to the action.'

In my opinion, the basis of a Buddhist social justice must provide clear explanations from the point of view of ordinary human beings with limited knowledge of the highest truths. The social and political teachings of Buddhism possess these criteria as they are based on empiricist epistemology, one that does not require the attainment of truths beyond the ordinary human capacity. These teachings are found in the *Agganna Sutta*, *Cakkavatti Sutta*, *Kutadanta Sutta*, the *Jatakas* and the *Vinaya*'s monastic practices.

In my analysis of Buddhist principles of social justice in the *Suttas* and the *Vinaya*, I have taken as a scope the issues of social structure, the state, and the roles of the state and society, and examined two particular activities, namely, punishment of wrongdoers and distribution of social (and economic) benefits. The following are my findings:

(1) Buddhism holds that societies originated and developed naturally without resorting to superhuman interventions. The



first humans did not differ in their social status, but over a period of time differences occurred as the result of their interactions with the surrounding environment. Physical differences resulted from differences in the consumption of natural resources. Human beings initially consumed resources for their basic requirements. But as bigger communities developed, out of greed, they began to consume more and more resources causing harm to the natural environment. In fear of not having enough, they distributed and established ownerships over them. Some people became discontent and caused harm to other human beings and their properties leading to social disharmony. People in these protosocieties, then, needed to appoint someone who would punish wrongdoers and award the righteous. They elected the most suitable people to assume these duties. The state and government were, then, established in order to fulfil this social need. Their establishments show the desire of people to live harmoniously in a society.

(2) According to Buddhism, there are three basic goals or values of human life: i) the present goals of acquiring possessions, developing friendships and maintaining one's life; ii) long-term goals of having a peace of mind, security, living in a harmonious society and acquiring knowledge; and iii) the highest goal of freedom from all kinds of suffering. Buddhism holds that every human being desires these goals. In order to achieve them, society must be able to provide each person



with their basic requirements. Moreover, its members must also refrain from harming each other and each other's properties. They must not harm each other with false speech and take advantage through falsehood and deceits. In sum, human beings must establish righteous kinds of relationships with one another. In order to do so, they must be able to maintain their basic "humanities" through non-greed, non-violence and having the right view. A state or a government that provides no guarantee of justice, especially with regard to the provision of basic requisites, would prevent this from happening and undermine other social relationships. The state, therefore, has a duty to ensure social justice by getting rid of various injustices and promote righteousness in the following ways:

- (a) The prevention of violence and ensuring justice and security in the punishment of wrong-doers: When there is a violation of the basic human rights, the state must ensure justice by punishing wrongdoers justly and fairly. The state must provide the assurance to prevent future violations and must not allow the conditions for violence to occur.
- (b) Human beings cannot live without the four requisites: The lack of these requisites results in the violations of rights such as violence, physical harm, and damages to properties. This may undermine other social relationships and even to the loss of the basic humanities of citizens.



The state and the government must bring about social justice in their distribution of social (economic) benefits and ensure that all their citizens receive the four requisites equally.

Social justice can only occur when a society respects its citizens' basic humanities and carry out its roles and duties appropriately. According to Buddhism, in order for a society to prosper, two basic conditions must be met: each citizen must be aware of his/her relationship with others and respect their humanities. In order to create a harmonious society, and to avoid conflicts, each citizen must respect one another and treat each other with loving-kindness. A society must also have basic inviolable norms or rules enacted by its citizens through its social institutions, i.e. the state and the government. These rules govern its social relationships and when they are violated, the violators must be punished accordingly. Although these rules are to be upheld and respected, Buddhism also allows for their amendments if the circumstances in which they were enacted change, and they no longer serve to maintain the basic humanities of individuals. The violation of just rules may result in the destruction of a society as a whole. To uphold the basic social norms and to prevent social discords, the restriction of loving-kindness with regard to the violators is sometimes necessary.

According to this analysis, "justice" is, then, defined as 'when a person receives the results (or benefits) appropriate to his/her status and actions.' The word "status" has two meanings: firstly,



one's status as a human being (individual status); and secondly, one's social status, which occurs after human beings come together to form a society. As an individual, everyone is equal in his/her status as a human being. Everyone has similar psychological needs of the basic requisites of life, personal security, possessions, and a desire to achieve his/her goals without being obstructed by others. But as a member of a society, each person differs in his/her status according to his/her occupation, role and social duty. These differences do not mark an individual as higher or lower in status, but according to Buddhism, what determine them are the moral standard and virtues possessed by that individual.

When human beings come together in a society, their differing behaviors affect the outcome of that society. These behaviors are divided into two main types: firstly, negative behaviours that destroy social relationships and lead to the loss of a person's basic humanity; and secondly, positive behaviors that enhance good relationships and promote other social benefits (*Singalaka Sutta*). A person's social status is, therefore, linked to his/her moral or ethical behavior towards others; and his/her individual status as a human being is related to his/her individual moral and ethical standard. Buddhism sees these two statuses as having common basic characteristics. It also emphasizes the importance of the different ethical standards among individuals.

With regard to the distribution of interests or social benefits, the



maintenance and preservation of individuals' basic humanities serve as the foundations of their just and equal provisions. Taking into account the differences of individuals based on their status and actions, the provisions of the basic requisites to individuals must be done in accordance with their capacities to exercise their freedom in their professions and duties, and at the same time, it must not violate the basic social norms and undermine individuals' basic humanities. One can see the influence of *karmic* justice in this perspective.

Buddhist Perspective of “Justice”

According to this analysis, Buddhist perspective of “justice” may be summarized as follows.

Two levels of justice exist in Theravada Buddhism:

- (1) Universal justice, which is synonymous with “moral justice” or justice in accordance with the natural law. This justice is linked to *karma*.
- (2) Social justice, which means fairness with regard to: i) things that are beneficial to one's life in a society, and ii) in the distribution of social welfares. The term benefit here not only refers to material benefits, but also to opportunities to further oneself and to strive toward one's highest goals. This kind of justice is linked to social and political teachings and practices.

Universal justice arises from the natural law. It is a process that governs all things in the universe, including human relationships.



The law controls the appropriate outcomes of moral actions that arise from a person's freewill. It provides each action with a result in accordance with other related sets of causes and conditions. The law of moral justice or *karma* determines that good deeds bear good results and bad deeds bad results. Justice is here defined as the appropriateness and balance between the actions performed and the consequences received. *Karma* will provide justice consistently and without bias, regardless of the doer's awareness of it.

The distribution of results, whether in the form of punishments for wrongdoers or rewards for the righteous, occurs appropriately and in accordance with their causes and conditions. It is a mechanism whose goal is one of moral retribution. The doer does not have to be aware of it and usually can neither fully explain nor comprehend the cause of his/her reward or punishment. It is a justice that is beyond the cognition of ordinary human beings. Buddhism ensures that just responsibilities follow each and every action, each consequence is always appropriate to its cause. Even though *karmic* justice poses problems in explaining and clarifying everyday life situations, it can nevertheless provide a basis for social justice. I refer, in particular, to basic teaching that every norm and rules must be in accordance with or based on the natural law, a law that is morally correct and just, and those that contradict this natural law is most likely to cause harm to individuals and the society. Therefore, social laws, which aim to benefit individuals and the society, must be coherent with the



principles of causal relationships and human actions. They must be based on the universal *karmic* justice in accordance with the motto: ‘when one performs good deeds, one receives good results (rewards) appropriate to one’s action; and when one performs bad deeds, one receives bad results (punishments) appropriate to one’s action’. This universal value must always be the basis of social justice.

Moreover, the social and political teachings in the *suttas* (e.g. *Agganna Sutta*, *Cakkavatti Sutta*, *Singalaka Sutta*, *Kutadanta Sutta*) and the practices in the *Vinaya* (*Mahavibhangha* 1-2, *Vinaya Pitaka*) provide important principles regarding human values that can be used as a basis of social justice. These texts hold that respect must be given to each person’s basic values such as freedom of action and expression and the basic human rights (life and the four requisites), and to the highest social goals that enable individuals to live harmoniously in a society. Norms that take into account these basic human values and goals can be used to determine social justice and as the lowest requirements, they must not be violated. This concept is derived from the teachings of the five precepts and *Parajika Vinaya* rules, which are also regarded as inviolable basic norms for monks and nuns.

The first and most important economic and material benefits to be distributed are the basic necessities of life, i.e. the four requisites. Buddhism views these requisites as essential in the preservation of individuals’ basic humanities. The lack of proper distribution



may result in the undermining of individuals' humanities, which may lead to the destruction of the basic humanities of the whole society and its citizens. Furthermore, Buddhism holds that economic benefits must be distributed in accordance with each individual's capacity (actions). This view is similar to the liberalist theory of justice, which also takes into account each person's capacity as a criterion. As each person is required to perform his/her roles and duties according to his/her status, and acquire material benefits and the four requisites essential for maintenance of correct relationships within a society, he/she must be given the freedom to lead his/her life and to spend and consume material wealth that he/she acquired through honest means. The distribution of economic benefits must take into account each person's freedom and capacity to carry out his/her professions. However, the acquisitions of material wealth must not be the result of unlawful actions and the society must ensure that there are no violations of individual's property rights in this process.

Does the idea of justice as described above contradict the concept of compassion? The impossibility of human intervention in the process of universal *karmic* justice disallows any kind of compassionate acts. Even the loving-kindness of the Buddha cannot wholly intervene its outcomes. This universal *karmic* justice, therefore, cannot be used to determine social phenomena, and being linked to the concept of rebirth, it cannot provide any stimulus to bring about a cause for social justice. For example,



in the case of the lack of four requisites, if Buddhism holds that this is the result of past *karma* rather than the existing social and political structures (e.g. an injustice caused by the state), one must accept this situation as fair and just, and in accordance with *karma*. On the other hand, from the point of view of the basic social and political factors of life, the injustice and other situations received by individuals are seen as related to the society they live in and not results of past *karma*. Individuals and the society, like all other natural phenomena, are causally dependent. Individuals' situations are causally related to their social conditions, and social conditions are causally related to individuals' actions. Society, therefore, must take responsibility for the injustice received by individuals. In particular, the state and the government chosen by the society must take direct responsibility for the situations that occur within their jurisdiction and must provide tools for the reorganization of social structures to aid the lives of those affected individuals. The society as a whole must show loving-kindness towards those who received injustice and ensure that basic social justice be given to them through the process of social, political and administrative reorganization. In this sense, if an act of loving-kindness improves the society and aids individuals' interests, for example, by providing them with the four requisites, it is not regarded as a violation of justice. But, in some cases, acts of loving-kindness and compassion must be restricted if those acts go against the basic principles of a good society. Therefore, the view of justice that takes into account its social and political



contexts embraces acts of loving-kindness, but the view of justice based on the teaching of *karma* denies them.

In my opinion, *karmic* justice helps one to understand that the correct basis for social justice must be one that is consistent, unbiased and applicable to all. Social justice cannot be explained or determined within the scope of *karma*, which is linked to the concept of rebirth. But when it is based on the Buddhist social and political teachings and the *sangha* practices in the *Vinaya*, it becomes much more applicable. Justice based on these teachings and practices, unlike *karmic* justice, does not pose complex epistemological problems. In a society that consists of differing views, justice that takes into account the basic humanities of individuals and the relationships between individuals and society should be the more applicable than *karmic* justice.

Suggestions

- (1) Suggestions regarding application and policies: Living in good societies and communities help promote one's quality of life. Buddhist *karmic* justice teaches us that any principle governing a state or society must be in accordance with the universal truth, and not biased with regard to ethnicity, class or particular groups of people. Buddhist justice that takes into account its social and political contexts teaches us that the state must be aware of the basic human conditions (human rights) and other factors that aid the lives of individuals and the society. Providing enough basic requisites and laying down rules that overcome social obstacles help provide the



conditions for other higher values that one can strive to achieve.

- (2) This research does not go into details regarding Buddhist punishment theories. Despite various studies on this subject, such as Somparn Promta (2005), their conclusions are still subject to debate. The study of punishments in the *Vinaya* monastic rules could provide further discussions on social practices and norms, just laws and the allocations of state's power. There are currently very few studies on the Buddhist understanding of the relationships of powers and their allocations in a social system, and the process of social justice. Those who are interested are encouraged to study these topics, which could provide an important addition to the discussion regarding implications of Buddhist social teachings.
- (3) Regarding the philosophical debates on the concept of *karma*, there are currently many important issues being discussed in the field of philosophy of religion. From surveying various works in English, the topic of *karma* and its relationship to moral justice, in particular, is currently very widely discussed and much debated on. The topic of *karma* has been discussed quite freely and rationally by Western scholars, their views not being limited to the scope of a religious system. Many of the issues are not mentioned in this paper. Thai Buddhists are encouraged to join these debates and provide their own perspectives and solutions, which could be of much benefit to Buddhist Studies at the national and the international levels.



References

In Thai

Boonnoon, C. "Social Justice in Buddhist Perspective," *Journal of Buddhist Studies Chulalongkorn University* 17:2 (2010): 36-93.

Changkwanyuen, P. *Political Thoughts in the Tipitaka*. Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 1991.

_____. *Dhammaratta-Dhammaraja*. Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 1999.

Department of Religious Affairs, Ministry of Education. *The Tipitaka (Thai Edition)*, Vols. 1-45. Bangkok: Department of Religious Affairs Press, 1971.

Mahamakut Buddhist University. *The Tipitaka and Commentaries*, Vols. 1-91. Bangkok: Mahamakut Buddhist University Press, 1998.

Na Rangsi, S. *Buddhist Philosophy from the Tipitaka*. Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 2000.

Phra Dhammapitaka (P. A. Payutto). *Buddhadhamma*. Bangkok: Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 1995a.

_____. *The Complexities Surrounding the Vinaya*. Bangkok:



Buddhadhamma Foundation, 1995b

Promta, S. "Suffering in Buddhist Philosophy: A Darwinian Perspective." *Journal of Buddhist Studies Chulalongkorn University* 7:1 (2000): 2-80.

_____. "Research Project: 'Buddhism and Capital Punishment'." *Journal of Buddhist Studies Chulalongkorn University* 12:3 (2005): 5-116.

Puntasen, A. *Buddhist Economics: Evolution, Theories and Its Application to Various Economic Subjects*. Bangkok: Amarin Publishing Group, 2005.

Satha-Anand, S. *Faith and Wisdom*. Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 2002.

Somboon, V. *Good Governance of the Past*. Bangkok: Komol Keemthong Press, 1989.

_____. *The Noble Disciplines for the 21st Century*. Bangkok: Komol Keemthong Press, 2002.

The Tipitaka-Tika, Electronic Version, Thai Translation, 3 Versions. Nakhon Pathom: Computer Institute, Mahidol University, 1994.



In English

Campbell, T. *Justice*. New York: St. Martin' Press, 2001.

Cho, S. "Selflessness: Toward a Buddhist Vision of Social Justice." *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 7 (2000): 76-85.

Fenn, M. "Two Notions of Poverty in the Pali Canon." *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 3 (1996): 98-125.

Garvey, S. P. 2003. "Restorative Justice, Punishment and Atonement." *Utah Law Review* 1 (2003): 203-317.

Harvey, P. *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Harvey, P. *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Hallisey, C. 1996. "Ethical Particularism in Theravada Buddhism." *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 3 (1996): 32-43.

Kalupahana, D. J. *Ethics in Early Buddhism*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995.

Kaufman, W. "Karma, Rebirth, and The Problem of Evil." *Philosophy East and West* 55 (January 2005): 15-32.



Keown, D. "Karma, Character, and Consequentialism." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24 (1996): 329-350.

Loy, D. R. "How to Reform a Serial Killer: The Buddhist Approach to Restorative Justice." *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 7 (2000): 145-168.

Payutto, P. A. *Good, Evil and Beyond*. Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation, 1999.

Reichenbach, B. R. 1990. *The Law of Karma: A Philosophical Studies*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990.

Ryan, A., ed. *Justice*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Satha-Anand, S. "Karma as Moral Justice in Thai Buddhism." *Manusya*, Special Issue 4 (2002): 72-83.

Wright, S. D. "Critical Questions Toward a Naturalized Concept of Karma in Buddhism." *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 2 (1994): 78-93.