

Personal Rights and Contemporary Buddhism

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THE QUESTION OF PERSONAL rights, as understood in the contemporary West, has not been of traditional concern in East Asian societies. The concept of rights, as demanding one's due, arose as part of the adversarial legacy of the West. In East Asia, on the other hand, the consensual model of society prevailed, ruling out any assertions of self against recognized forms of authority, whether secular or religious.¹ In the consensual society molded by Confucian ethics, it was the principle of *duty*, felt and carried out with sincerity, rather than *rights*, that was crucial for what it meant to be human. In fact, sincerity was at the heart of *li*, rites and rituals, that reached heaven (*t'ien*). Likewise, in periods of great Buddhist influence, it was the sense of *gratitude*, rather than *rights*, that was regarded as essential for a truly human life. Gratitude was born from a profound appreciation for all of life and nature, and it was to be expressed in various acts of compassion and thanksgiving.

The fact that the Buddhist tradition in its past history has had little to say about personal rights in the current sense of the term does not mean that Buddhists were not concerned with human well-being, with the dignity and autonomy of the spirit. In fact, throughout its long history, in spite of some dark and unsavory moments, Buddhism has taught the path whereby all forms of existence, animate and inanimate, would be able to radiate and shine in their own natural light. Contemporary Buddhism, if it is to survive in the modern world and especially if it is to es-

