

## Social and Cultural Rights in Buddhism

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WE CANNOT ISOLATE THE legal/political/economic level of human rights discourse from the metaphysical level and the sociocultural level.<sup>1</sup> A particular culture's notion of rights is not understandable without understanding what it thinks an individual is, what a society is, in what sort of universe. And it is not evaluable without knowing their social "habits of the heart," in Bellah's nice phrase.<sup>2</sup> So, I begin with the Buddhist universe, and I will try to convey the essence of Buddhist habits of behavior; only then will I summarize some Buddhist teachings on human society.

It is important to acknowledge at the outset that Buddhist elements never had much success in affecting the political/legal/economic level in the highly stratified, hierarchical, premodern Asian civilizations. The principles of human rights were all there in the Buddha's earliest teachings, and he embodied them in the constitution of his *Aryasamgha* "Holy Community" within the society. These principles often influenced the good among monarchs and other individuals to moderate or even temporarily suspend the oppressiveness of existing social practices, but they never led to any sort of institutional democracy until modern times, which only happened then with outside help. Though my scholarship focuses on the Buddhist traditions, I want to avoid the danger of romanticizing the social realities of ancient times, and I do not agree with those advocates of traditional cultures who in my opinion underestimate the unprecedented value of the modern human rights tradition. However, the Western revolutionary trumpeting

