

## What makes a 'Good City'? A Buddhist Perspective

Dr. Elizabeth Harris

A city is a place of radical plurality - plurality of religion, belief, ethnicity, culture, economic status, political affiliation, sexuality and ability. How to manage this plurality - these factors of difference - is a major challenge for any city authority. For plurality can be explosive if awareness of difference is triggered by international events, perceived discrimination or resentment about unequal distribution of resources. Different words and phrases have been coined to describe the task of making a city harmonious: integration; cohesion; regeneration; renewal; capacity-building; gaining stakeholder confidence; co-responsibility; co-existence.

What can the insights of Buddhism offer to this? Buddhism as we know it today began in the fifth century BCE with a 29 year old, Siddhartha Gautama, leaving an aristocratic home in north-east India to become an itinerant religious searcher and then preacher. According to Buddhist practitioners, he became a Buddha - one who had awoken to the truth that upholds the cosmos - after six years of exploration. He taught this truth for about forty years, forming around him a fourfold community of lay men, lay women, monks and nuns. He died at an advanced age surrounded by loving disciples, having created a movement that was to spread throughout northern India, Central Asia and far beyond. Can what he taught speak to a modern city? Buddhists would say it can for two main reasons: the context of India in the fifth century BCE was not completely unlike the twenty first century; the teaching of the Buddha transcends the particular and can speak to the human condition throughout time.

Buddhism was successful in India because it offered something for the whole of society. Not only did the Buddha call upon people to leave their families to follow him as celibate members of an Order, he also advised rulers and inspired many who remained deeply involved in family life. He did this against a backdrop of growing urbanization, economic change and a plethora of competing beliefs and ideologies. Those who left their homes to follow him had to compete for lay patronage in a market-place of religious practices and political affiliations. It is also clear from the earliest Buddhist texts, the Theravāda Buddhist Canon, that there was violence in the Buddha's India. One stereotype of Buddhism is that it is about individual well-being and peace only. The texts challenge this. They are often about society. The aristocratically-born Buddha is seen as an adviser to kings and political leaders, in times of war and conflict. References to torture methods, the

consequences of war, communal conflict, criminality, patronage, poverty and privilege pepper the Canon. For instance, when speaking about the dangers of selfish craving in one discourse, the Buddha is recorded as saying:

Again, with sensual pleasures as the cause...men break into houses, plunder wealth, commit burglary, ambush highways, seduce others' wives and when they are caught, kings have many kinds of torture inflicted on them. The kings have them flogged with whips, beaten with canes, beaten with clubs; they have their hands cut off, their feet cut off, their ears and noses cut off...<sup>1</sup>

At one level, this may seem a world away from twenty first century Europe. There are no highwaymen on horseback or kings with a license to torture, at least not in England. However, there are muggings, cases of anti-social behaviour, domestic violence and robberies, from mobile phones to personal identities. And torture has certainly not left the world scene. Buddhists would say that the teachings of the Buddha have as much to say to this situation as to the fifth century BCE.

Before moving to this, let me offer a word about the spread of Buddhism after the Buddha's death. As it spread from India to the north, south and east, it interacted with the cultures and religions it met. It drew into itself what could be made Buddhist and was influenced by other philosophies. Buddhism as we know it today, therefore, is incredibly diverse. Some scholars divide it into Southern or Theravāda Buddhism (Burma, Laos, Sri Lanka, Thailand), Northern or Buddhism (Tibet, Bhutan, Sikkhim, Mongolia) and Eastern Buddhism (China, Japan, Vietnam). The last two can also be called Mahāyāna Buddhism. All these forms are now present in Britain and new ones too, such as the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order. In this paper I will draw mainly but not exclusively on Theravāda Buddhism.

To pass to the Buddha's teaching, the Buddhist claim that it can speak to the human condition throughout time is rooted in the following principles about human life that most schools of Buddhism would accept:

- Human life is precious and should be protected. If people are in poverty or in other forms of need, realizing their spiritual potential is impossible. Simply struggling to live will take all their energy. So each person should be provided with the means to meet their basic needs for food, shelter and security;
- Human life and the world itself is shot through with greed, hatred and ignorance at different levels, from the individual to the institutional. These are the roots of violence, conflict, disharmony and personal suffering.

- The human spiritual journey should be about lessening, or eradicating, our greed, hatred and ignorance, and developing compassion for all. Some Buddhists would speak about uncovering the Buddha within or our Buddha nature, which is pure compassion and wisdom.

When this is applied to the modern city, Buddhism has something to say about three, related areas:

- The importance of people being given equal opportunities;
- The qualities needed for coherent and compassionate governance;
- Finding a code of conduct for all in a plural society.

### **Equal Opportunities**

Lack of social cohesion in our cities is often attributed to economic deprivation and inequalities in social provision. Where should the responsibility lie if this it to be addressed? In the Theravāda texts there are two stories that explore this. Both are mythical and are told by the Buddha to make a point to his listeners. The main character in the first is a ruler whose land is wracked with discontent and crime to the extent that people are afraid to move from their homes. The ruler seeks a religious ritual, a sacrifice, which will turn the tide. He consults a spiritual teacher. This is the advice he is given:

The chaplain replied, "Your Majesty's country is beset by thieves, it is ravaged, villages and towns are being destroyed, the countryside is infested with brigands. If Your Majesty were to tax this region, that would be the wrong thing to do. Suppose Your Majesty were to think: 'I will get rid of this plague of robbers by executions and imprisonment, or by confiscation, threats and banishment', the plague would not be properly ended. Those who survived would later harm Your Majesty's realm. However, with this plan you can completely eliminate the plague. To those in the kingdom who are engaged in cultivating crops and raising cattle, let Your Majesty distribute grain and fodder; to those in trade, give capital; to those in government service assign proper living wages. Then those people, being intent on their own occupations, will not harm the kingdom. Your Majesty's revenues will be great, the land will be tranquil and not beset by thieves, and the people, with joy in their hearts, will play with their children, and dwell in open houses. <sup>2</sup>

In other words, the ruler is dissuaded from religious ritual and encouraged to tackle the causes of the violence in his society. In telling this story, the Buddha was illustrating something that lay at the heart of his teaching: that if society or the individual is to change, the causes of dis-ease must be pinpointed. In this ruler's society, the cause of unrest was poverty. The majority of working

people simply did not have enough to survive on - and the state rather than the citizens bore responsibility for this. Charity was not answer. It was up to the ruler to give people the means to become self-sufficient.

The second story has a similar message. A series of rulers is given the following advice by their spiritual advisers: 'Let no wrongdoing prevail in your kingdom and to those who are in need, give wealth'. Eventually, a king who does not keep this advice comes along. He is soon faced with a situation beyond his control. Poverty becomes rampant and this leads to theft. The king realises his mistake too late. For when he begins to give wealth to the robbers, even more begin to steal in hope of wealth from the state. He then veers to extreme forms of punishment, which, in turn, make people become more extreme in their crimes, not stopping at theft but turning to murder, sexual misconduct and harsh speech. A precipitous path towards chaos is followed and, as people move along it, they lose their beauty and have ever diminishing life-spans, from thousands of years to just ten. It comes to this:

And for those of a ten-year life-span, there will come to be a "sword-interval" of seven days, during which they will mistake one another for wild beasts. Sharp swords will appear in their hands and, thinking: "This is a wild beast!" they will take each other's lives with those swords.

At this point, hope does not come from the state but from the people themselves. Some decide to leave the city for a time, refusing to kill. When they return seven days later, they are renewed and pledge to one another that there will be no more killing. Gradually the city moves towards wholeness.

What is striking about these two stories is that economic deprivation and poverty are seen to be the main cause of violence in society. Furthermore, responsibility for tackling this cause is seen to lie with the state rather than with individual citizens. Both narratives stress that the state has a responsibility to give people the means to live in security if a 'good city' is to emerge. Both pull no punches about what will happen if the state fails. Especially in the second story, though, it is also recognised that people themselves can change the way they relate to each other, when things go wrong, to create a better future. People are not puppets of the state. What is good for a society flows down from those in government, but it can also come from the roots upwards.

### **The qualities needed for coherent and compassionate governance**

Building on stories such as these and others, some Buddhists would say that a blueprint for government was present within Buddhism from the earliest times. Mithra Wettimuny, a Sri Lankan Buddhist, actually drafted a proposal

for a constitution in Sri Lanka based on ten Buddhist qualities. He said this when interviewed for a BBC World Service series:

The Buddha did explain how to run a country. Buddhism has a political vision based on the ten royal qualities. These are qualities embedded in the Noble Eightfold Path and they are significant for leadership, management and administration. They are: gifting; sacrifice; virtue; austerity; softness, which means to acquire a calm tranquil state of mind; uprightness, that is to safeguard the truth; non-harm or non-ill-will, which means the development of kindness; compassion, patience and forbearance; and the tenth is the avoidance of conflict. This is very important when it comes to ruling a country because conflict is the norm of the day. It is a difficult quality to develop. What it means is that you don't go into unnecessary argument and debate. You certainly discuss but you don't argue for the purpose of arguing. This also ensures the highest form of democracy.....And one of the necessary qualities in order to ensure the well-being of society as laid down by the Buddha is that the rulers must gather in harmony, conduct affairs in harmony and disperse in harmony.<sup>3</sup>

In these qualities, lies a challenge for any who wish to promote a peaceful and good city. Can they sacrifice their own interests, listen to others and avoid conflict? Can they bring an ethical dimension to their decisions? Can they have compassion for all, bearing ill-will to none? A Buddhist would expect no less.

### **Finding a code of conduct for all in a plural society**

Asoka (c. 272-231 BCE), Mauryan Emperor in third century BCE India is said to have converted to Buddhism after a particularly bloody imperial campaign. From that point onwards, in an almost fatherly way according to the tradition, he sought to school his subjects in how to live in harmony with one another, in spite of their differences. He did this through sending officers throughout his kingdom to propagate religion, and also through rock and pillar edicts (where he is named King Piyadasi). No reference is made in these edicts to the technical aspects of Buddhism. Their focus is morality and a code of conduct. One of the major rock edicts concerns relationships between religions and beliefs, and contains these words:

But beloved-of-the Gods, King Piyadasi, does not value gifts and honours as much as he values this - that there should be growth in the essentials of all religions. Growth in essentials can be done in different ways, but all of them have as their root restraint in speech, that is, not praising one's own religion or condemning the religions of others

without good cause. And if there is cause for criticism, it should be done in a mild way. But it is better to honour other religions for this reason. By so doing, one's own religion benefits and so do other religions, while doing otherwise harms one's own religion and the religions of others.<sup>4</sup>

Asoka is still remembered today by Buddhists as an ideal example of good governance. This edict goes back to the Buddha who, in a context where acrimonious exchanges took place between different religious groups, encouraged his followers not to feel ill-will when other groups criticized them, but to engage in dialogue, pointing out misunderstandings with reason and courtesy. The same spirit could be seen in Sri Lanka, in the early nineteenth century, when Buddhist monks, faced with aggressive preaching from Christian missionaries, sent petitions to their British rulers, urging them to encourage the missionaries to act with respect and dignity towards other religions. It can be seen now in the involvement of Buddhists in the Birmingham Council of Faiths and other inter-faith initiatives throughout the city.

A Buddhist code of conduct for a good city would stress courtesy, respect and willingness to engage in dialogue where differences between people become acrimonious. A realism that can be found at the heart of Buddhism informs this. The Buddha originally attracted followers by inviting them to come and see if his teachings worked; to see if they actually led to the decrease of suffering and greater harmony. On the evidence we have, the Buddha was concerned about what worked, about what could be valued empirically. He sometimes avoided dogmatic statements because of this. It is empirically obvious that a society will be more harmonious if people of different world-views or from different cultural backgrounds listen to one another with respect and courtesy; if people feel valued and affirmed.

However, realism is not enough by itself if a code of conduct is to be accepted. Buddhists make decisions about how to act on the basis of what is good for self and what is good for others. The two are intimately linked. A verse from a well-loved text, the Dhammapada, illustrates this:

One who, while himself seeking happiness, oppresses with violence  
other beings who also desire happiness, will not attain happiness  
hereafter<sup>5</sup>

A good action is one that benefits both self and others. For an act that oppresses others, although it may seem good for self, will eventually bring suffering to the doer. This does not mean, however, that we should do good for selfish reasons. Buddhism places much emphasis on loving kindness, empathy and compassion. For all humans are in the same boat. All of us desire happiness. All of us eschew pain. When we are aware of this, when we can stand in the shoes of the 'other', we are more likely to act wisely and

compassionately. Loving kindness and compassion, in fact, are seen as divine qualities by Buddhists. 'Whoever in this world harms living beings', says an ancient Buddhist text, 'in whom there is no compassion for living beings - know him as an outcast'<sup>6</sup>

In today's cities, one of the most important ways in which compassion can be expressed is in a willingness to 'pass over' to the other side. Can a Jew who supports the state of Israel empathize with a Muslim who is in touch with Palestinians, whose livelihoods have been taken away by Israeli action? Can a Sikh who believes her religion has been abused in the media pass over to the side of those who champion free speech? Can an unemployed Muslim youth pass over to the side of an unemployed white young person, who believes Muslim organizations are getting all the funding? A willingness to do this, Buddhists would say, should spring from the awareness that all our views and opinions are conditioned - by our background, our environment and our selfishness. It is possible that they are wrong. Only by encountering what is 'other' or through meditation can truth be worked towards.

### Concluding Thoughts

A contemporary city is place where the tensions and the joys of the world meet. It can be informed by a materialism that hides inequalities, sectarian divisions and conflict, or by the will to face and overcome differences. Buddhists would, above all, urge those who seek a city's good not to forget that all conflicts have a cause and that social cohesion must be rooted in a social justice that enables all to live in dignity.

### Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> The Greater Discourse on the Mass of Suffering, *Majjhima Nikāya*, Sutta 13, translated by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli

<sup>2</sup> Kūṭadanta Sutta, *Majjhima Nikāya*, Sutta 5, translated by Maurice Walsh for Wisdom Publications

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in *What Buddhists Believe*, Elizabeth J Harris, 1998, Oxford: Oneworld, p. 173.

<sup>4</sup> The 12<sup>th</sup> rock edict, translated by Ven S. Dhammika for the Buddhist Publication Society, Sri Lanka.

<sup>5</sup> Verse 131 - translated by Acharya Buddhārakkhita.

<sup>6</sup> *Sutta Nipata*, verse 117, trans. H Saddhatissa.