

What makes a 'Good City'?
A Buddhist Perspective
(extract)

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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...

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.

[...]

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.