

Comparative Reflections on Buddhist Political Thought: Aśoka, Shambhala, and the General Will

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Historically and philosophically, there are two primary paradigms that capture much of Buddhist political thought. I will call these the Aśokan model and the Shambhalan model. The Aśokan model is deeply rooted in Buddhist history and has played a significant role in shaping Buddhist conceptions of political power, especially in South-East Asia, Bhutan, and Tibet.¹ King Aśoka is the first significant Buddhist king, and he represents the ideal Buddhist ruler and the normative standard for all future kings. The Aśokan model involves a balance between the ruler, the community of monks that constitute the Sangha, and the lay Buddhist people. The Aśokan king is a benevolent ruler who defends the Sangha and also maintains internal and national security. In a hostile and violent world, a powerful Aśokan king serves as the righteous protector of the Sangha, the Dharma, and the people. In contrast, the Shambhalan model is focused on creating a more enlightened populace and thus a more just political system. The Shambhalan approach, named after the mythical Buddhist kingdom of Shambhala where all people lived in profound harmony and peace (Midale 2006), aims for social change by increasing individual compassion and through non-violent social action. The Shambhalan paradigm is common in Buddhist Diaspora writings, and it is a model of political action embraced by some Engaged

Buddhists and Western Buddhists.² These two paradigms are not incompatible: the Shambhalan approach focuses on promoting justice by increasing enlightenment, the Aśokan approach on political legitimacy and a just basic structure for an unenlightened people. Aśokan and Shambhalan distinguish different approaches to political philosophy; one person can embrace both.

We will explore these two strands of Buddhist political thought and consider points of contrast and agreement with Western political philosophy, concentrating on Hobbes, Hume, and Rousseau. Buddhism provides the basis for a compelling critique of Hobbes's moral psychology, his individualism, and his account of social conflict. On the other hand, although many discussions of Buddhist politics focus on the need for greater virtue and a more enlightened people, the Aśokan Buddhist tradition, like Hobbes and Hume, has always emphasized the problem of competitive individualism and recognized the essential role of political authority. The classical Aśokan approach, however, is too undemocratic for contemporary societies. I conclude by sketching an alternative Buddhist theory of justice that is inspired by Rousseau's conception of the general will.

Human Nature, the State of Nature, and the Nature of Peace

As John Rawls has emphasized, one of the most important features of Western political thought is its individualism. Indeed, the starting point for contractualist theories of justice is the moral importance of the distinctness and separateness of persons (Rawls 1971, 27). In contrast, Buddhism emphasizes the

interdependence of persons and argues that the very idea of the independent autonomous self is rooted in ignorance and delusion. The conception of the person is the Archimedean point of a theory of justice. The distinct contours of Western and Buddhist political theory flow from their contrasting conceptions of the nature of persons.

In thinking about Western political thought, Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651) sets the stage nicely. Hobbes starts his defense of government with the idea of the "State of Nature," which conceptually precedes the formation of civil society and political power.³ Hobbes starts with a conception of human nature that is governed by the law of self-love. All voluntary actions are done for some perceived good, and the good is subjective and desire-based. What is good for a person is determined by the (rational and well-informed) desires of the person. Most importantly, Hobbes insists that the primary ends of human desire are self-preservation, pleasure, and power. Although Locke, Rousseau, Hume, Kant, and Rawls reject Hobbes's distinctive psychological egoism, they all share his basic individualism and the idea that a system of justice is necessary to solve social conflict. A social contract or convention justifies a system of law and government, which regulates our competitive instincts and resolves conflicts between individuals. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are secured under a system of justice. In defense of this contractualist conception of justice, Hobbes paints a picture of human relations without the restraint of civil law.

In addition to natural egoism, Hobbes defends the natural equality of all people by noting our common mortality and vulnerability. By nature, we are

sufficiently equal in strength and intellect that the weakest can kill the strongest either by ganging up in combination with others or by secret machinations. Eventually we all must sleep, and a mere rock to the head can end a life. For Hobbes, the prime goal is continued life, and yet we are all equally vulnerable to death. There is thus no basis for one person to claim greater rights or social status. Instead, social rank, worth, and value are determined by one's value to others, which Hobbes sums up as the price of one's services in a market.

Natural egoism and equality combine to undermine social harmony. The natural state of humans is a natural and basic competition for goods and power. However, in a competition without a dominant power, individual power is needed to secure even a modest share. Since people fear death and harm, and since some individuals are sure to pursue glory and power, all must be ready to fight and defend themselves in any way necessary to survive. This is Hobbes's basic right of nature: a right (a natural liberty) to judge and to take whatever is necessary for self-preservation. The basic law of nature is that each must strive to protect himself or herself by *whatever means* necessary. This is both a rational requirement and a biological necessity of being a person.

As a result of the right of nature, there is in a state of nature perpetual insecurity and distrust because all are in a race for power. No matter how much power I have, someone is likely to pursue more. Competition, distrust, and the vainglory of some lead to perpetual insecurity and conflict. Hobbes famously concludes that the natural state of conflict justifies a state of war of all against all. In a state of war, self-interest rightly rules; there are no binding contracts; and

there are no property rights. A promise or contract where there is no dominant power to back it up is worthless and foolhardy. There are no promises or contracts in the state of nature. Without promises and contracts there is no justice, and, as a result, people enjoy none of the advantages of social cooperation. In a state of nature, life is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (Hobbes 1994, 76).

This is the dilemma of the state of nature. Although we have a right to all things, we own nothing. In the pursuit of security, we all end up more insecure. In the pursuit of self-preservation, we end up more vulnerable. The solution for Hobbes is that we must seek peace and lay down our right to all things (provided others are willing to do so as well). The security and assurance of mutual agreements, however, requires a power to enforce it, and thus we must authorize a sovereign power, a government, to secure and enforce contracts and protect civil rights. For Hobbes, to avoid insecurity and death, the individual pursuit of self-interest must be restrained by civil law.

Buddhism, of course, recognizes the insecurity caused by the fear of death. However, Buddhism also emphasizes the inescapability of illness, aging, and death. This is the human condition. In addition, Buddhists argue that the pursuit of material gain and glory is based on delusion and does not lead to happiness. Desire satisfaction may temporarily distract us from our discontent, but it also undermines any possibility of inner peace. Buddhists agree with Hobbes that the pursuit of pleasure and power is a source of conflict and insecurity. But Buddhists emphasize that craving, the treadmill of desire after

desire that defines so much of everyday life, never brings real satisfaction. It is instead the source of suffering and dissatisfaction. Like Hobbes, Buddhism tells us to “seek peace,” but it is an *inner peace* that we must seek, not the artificial truce imposed by an external political power. Sovereign power brings civil peace, but what we really need is an inner transformation of desire itself.

External and internal conflicts are caused by the three *inner* poisons of greed, hatred, and ignorance. These three poisons are the root of all of our self-destructive emotions. It is easy to see that jealousy and anger are self-consuming; they wreak havoc on our health and peace of mind. The Dalai Lama describes these types of emotions as afflictions; it is “afflictive emotions” that are the real obstacle to both peace of mind and peaceful relationships (Dalai Lama 1999, 86–100). It is a core insight of Buddhism that, contra Hobbes, real peace comes from an inner peace of mind, which requires much more than external political security. Only a personal transformation, based on insight and wisdom, will end interpersonal conflict and lead to real happiness. If inner transformation is the key, what are the implications for the realm of politics?

The Shambhalan Paradigm

Monastic life is the classical path for Buddhists seeking enlightenment. The community of monks, the Sangha, is also a core social and political institution of Theravāda Buddhist societies. Before discussing the role and function of the Sangha, however, we will explore the non-monastic Shambhalan approach to

politics. The limits of the Shambhalan approach set the stage for the political significance of the Sangha as a check on sovereign power.

There is an important common element in Engaged Buddhism, Humanistic Buddhism, and many variations of Western Buddhism. In contrast to monastic Buddhism, these Buddhist teachings are addressed explicitly to lay Buddhists, and indeed to all people. This is one of the elements that distinguish what I call the Shambhalan approach – aptly called Shambhalan after the mythical Buddhist kingdom where all the people were enlightened and lived in profound harmony and peace (Midal 2006, 89). The mythological king of Shambhala asks the Buddha for a path to enlightenment that does not require renunciation of family life and civil society. For followers of Shambhala, as Chogyam Trungpa explains, “it is not necessary to renounce all material possessions and worldly pursuits ... the basic message of Shambhala teaching is that the best of human life can be realized under ordinary circumstances. That is the basic wisdom of Shambhala: that in this world, as it is, we can find a good and meaningful life that will also serve others.”⁴ On the Shambhalan approach the entire Buddhist community, laity and monastic, constitutes the Buddhist Sangha. This broader conception of the Sangha contrasts with the idea of a monastic Sangha, which emphasizes the importance of a withdrawal from society, from economic activity and family life.

The Shambhalan non-monastic approach is also a more secular form of Buddhism. It emphasizes the psychological insights and universal moral truths of Buddhism, which are supposed to be sharable by secular humanists and people of all faiths. The idea is to provide a vision of enlightenment that does not

presuppose controversial theological doctrines or metaphysics (Midal 2006, 96–7; Dalai Lama 1999, 234; see also Kiblinger 2005 and Flanagan 2011). Non-violence, compassion, generosity, forbearance, and self-restraint are universal values. These shared values provide an “Ethics for the New Millennium” based simply on a diagnosis of our discontents and an understanding of moral psychology that provides a path to inner peace, increased flourishing, and happiness (Dalai Lama 1999).

As a result, the non-theological Shambhalan vision offers a cosmopolitan conception of political philosophy. The goal is to reveal “a shared ethic to make our increasingly globalized world a more peaceful place” (Hanh 2012). Although it also has a monastic following, the Engaged Buddhism of Thich Nhat Hanh is especially influential because of its universal and global non-monastic teaching. Engaged Buddhism is focused on developing ever greater mindful awareness, non-violence, and compassion in all aspects of one’s everyday life. Similarly, the Dalai Lama develops an inspiring conception of boundless compassion, equanimity, and universal responsibility that would surely transform the world for the better (Dalai Lama 1999, chs 8–11). The goal is to have “A Heart as Wide as the World,” as Sharon Salzberg (1997) nicely puts it.

Like the monastic approach, the key to greater enlightenment is the practice of insight meditation. For Engaged Buddhists, however, meditative practice is not distinct from other daily activities; it is instead a distinctive form of engagement with all daily activities: eating a meal, brushing one’s teeth, answering the phone, working in a factory. Any form of work or activity can

provide the basis for meditation and greater mindfulness. Engaged Buddhism is aimed at living every day in a more enlightened, non-aggressive, and compassionate way.

The Shambhalan approach has a clear socio-political dimension. Individual self-transformation itself promotes social justice. The emphasis, however, is on developing inner peace, seeing the interdependence of all beings, and thus expressing greater compassion in all aspects of one's daily life. We must be the change we want to see. The social and political priority of personal transformation is the characteristic that distinguishes the Shambhalan approach to political philosophy.

Although Chogyam Trungpa, Thich Nhat Hanh, and the Dalai Lama differ in emphasis and approach, they agree on the priority of personal transformation in effecting socio-political change. Thich Nhat Hanh emphasizes that "Our daily lives have the most to do with the situation of the world. If we change our daily lives, we can change governments and the world" (Hanh 2006, 41–3). The Dalai Lama also argues that the first step for any social transformation is an inner transformation, a spiritual revolution (Dalai Lama 1999, 19–33). Competition and consumerism must be replaced with compassion, forbearance, and simplicity. Addressing the United States Congress, Thich Nhat Hanh explained that "all these acts of terrorism and violence come from wrong perceptions. Wrong perceptions are the ground for anger, violence, and hate. You cannot remove wrong perceptions with a gun" (Hanh 2006, 132).

Chogyam Trungpa, Thich Nhat Hanh, and the Dalai Lama clearly appreciate the problem of institutional injustice, but their main prescription for structural social change is through personal transformation. Of course, there is no reason why an Engaged Buddhist cannot be equally concerned with the basic structure of society. Indeed, the Engaged Buddhism of Sulak Sivaraksa centers on transforming the social and political structure of Thai society (Sivaraksa 1984, 1992; Hongladarom 1998).

To summarize, the Shambhalan paradigm has four core elements. First, it is a non-monastic approach that addresses all people, and as such it is adapted to everyday socio-economic needs and family life. Second, it offers a more secular and universal Buddhist vision, which is detached from more distinctively Buddhist concepts and metaphysics. The goal is to provide a basis for a shared ethic that brings together people from different theological perspectives. Third, it offers a cosmopolitan vision, and a conception of universal responsibility, for an interconnected global world. And, fourth, its prescription for social justice and world peace is cultivating compassion, generosity, and understanding. The goal is increased enlightenment and a collective awakening.

Recall that, for Hobbes, we are limited in our pursuit of desire by the desire of others, and our insecurity is caused by the threat that others pose. The Hobbesian problem is competitive individualism and the solution is the counterbalancing threat posed by a sovereign power. The sovereign ends the “war of all against all” so that we can pursue our desires without constant fear and insecurity. In contrast, for the Shambhalan, the key to peace is recognizing the

self-defeating nature of competitive and selfish desires. The real obstacle to peace is our own delusional, misguided selfishness.

The doctrine of the priority of individual enlightenment, with the goal of the collective awakening of all people, is the essence of the political philosophy of the Shambhalan approach. Insight meditation, and the increased mindfulness this brings, is itself political action. While competitive individualism is rooted in the delusion of egoism, insight meditation is the transformative means for overcoming competitiveness, materialism, vainglory, anger, hatred, and all the delusions of selfish egoism. If we can overcome our afflictive emotions, then selfishness will be transformed into boundless compassion. With enlightenment and inner transformation, we end the treadmill of destructive materialism, and all the circumstances that give rise to the problems of justice dissolve. In a world where we all are deeply committed to non-violence and compassion, there is no injustice and thus no need for rules of justice.

Unfortunately, this ideal Shambhalan world is not the one we inhabit. The point of Hobbes's social contract, or Hume's social conventions, is to respond to the problem of selfishness and partiality that defines too much of human interactions. Indeed, Hume agrees that the Shambhalan ideal renders rules of justice unnecessary. He writes:

Suppose, that, though the necessities of the human race continue the same as present, yet the mind is so enlarged, so replete with friendship and generosity, that every man has the utmost

tenderness for every man, and feels no more concern for his own interest than for that of his fellows: It seems that the USE of justice would, in this case, be suspended by such an extensive benevolence, nor would the divisions and barriers of property and obligation ever been thought of ... Every man, upon this supposition, being a second self to another, would trust all his interests to the discretion of every man; without jealousy, without partition, without distinction. And the whole human race would form only one family.

(Hume 1983, sect. III: 21–2)

The Shambhalan solution does render justice unnecessary, but it also assumes near universal enlightenment. Indeed, is this not why Shambhala is a mythical kingdom? Buddhists recognize and emphasize the three poisons, and afflictive emotions, that give rise to conflict and insecurity. In response to conflict and insecurity, laws that enforce rules of social justice are necessary. In short, all societies need rules of justice, enforcement mechanism for the rules, and political institutions.

It is noteworthy that the monastic Sangha (the community of monks dedicated to moral virtue, meditation, and increased enlightenment) is governed by over 200 rules that constitute the Vinaya Code of monastic discipline. The Sangha is also usually hierarchical in its social structures, and the monastic code is enforced with sanctions, among them expulsion from the Sangha for sexual

intercourse, theft, homicide, or claiming knowledge that one does not have, including the heresy of propounding false doctrines.⁵

The Shambhalan vision does indeed provide an inspirational ideal, but it must be supplemented by an account of just laws and political structures that regulate imperfect social relations. Of course, this is not to deny that increased mindfulness and compassion will improve both one's own life and the lives of others. Indeed, the more enlightened and virtuous a people, the less they will need external laws to regulate their behavior. We will return to the importance of the Shambhalan vision after discussing the limits of the Aśokan model.

Political philosophy must address human nature as it is. Buddhism highlights and diagnoses the disordering and corrupting influence of the passions, and thus the need for rulers to maintain civil order. Indeed, Somboon Suksamran (1984, 25–6) extracts an analogy of Hobbes's conception of the state of nature (as the origin of political authority) from Buddhist creation myths. After the emergence of elements and then planets out of a primordial fire, life slowly evolves and differentiates into plants, animals, and then humans. When humans first evolved, there were unlimited amounts of clear-grained rice, there was abundance for all, and all property was communal. With time, however, some people became increasingly interested in sexual relationships, and as a result they were cut off and separated from the community. Others became greedy, despite having their needs satisfied, and hoarded rice. With the introduction of lust and greed, passions flared; and with shortages of rice and the jealousies of romantic passions, conflict, competition, and discontent inevitably followed.

Competition for goods and unbridled passions also led to theft, fraud, and deception, and, in response to these retaliations, retribution and punishments. The need for a ruler to restore civil peace and order became clear to all. The best and most favored among the people was thus chosen to rule and regulate society. In Buddhist mythology, too, the origin of government is a solution to immorality and disorder, and its purpose is thus to create civil order and reintroduce security and morality.

A Buddhist theory of justice must also focus on the role of government and the basic civil and economic structure of society. As John Rawls has emphasized, the basic structure of society must be a central focus of any theory of justice (Rawls 1971, 9–11). The basic structure of society determines civil rights and responsibilities, powers and opportunities, property rights and control of the means of production, and, of course, income and the distribution of wealth. What then is the Buddhist model of government and of a just basic social structure? We will consider two possible answers to this question: the first is the Theravāda Aśokan model; the second, a Buddhist form of democratic socialism inspired by Rousseau's idea of the general will.

The Aśokan Paradigm

The Aśokan paradigm shaped political and social institutions in the Theravāda Buddhist countries of South-East Asia. From roughly 304 to 230 BCE, about 100 years after the death of Buddha, Aśoka conquered, unified, and ruled the northern territories of what is now contemporary India.⁶ The rule of Aśoka, who

converted to Buddhism after his triumphant, but horrific, conquest over Kalinga (modern Orissa), marked the first rise of Buddhism to a national religion on a grand scale. Overcome by the death and destruction of war, he committed himself to the benevolent and just rule of his subjects. As a Buddhist ruler, he adopted vegetarianism, dug wells for the people, provided free medical care for humans and animals, and, in general, supported the public welfare.

We are told that King Aśoka promoted religious toleration, but, even more important, as a Buddhist king he devoted his rule to spreading the Dharma, the teaching of the Buddha, and supporting the community of monks, the Sangha. Aśoka also convened the Third Buddhist Council, which ensured the accuracy and orthodoxy of the teaching and practice of Buddhism. The decisions and commentaries of the Third Council were widely disseminated by Aśoka and, according to tradition, they provided the basis for the Theravāda Buddhist tradition and the Pali canon. It is hard to exaggerate the significance of the rule of Aśoka to Buddhism in South-East Asia.

As a just and compassionate ruler, Aśoka rejected war as a means of territorial expansion or as a tool of national interests. It is perhaps difficult today to appreciate the moral significance of this decision. It is now a commonplace that, although defensive war and humanitarian interventions are permissible, wars for national gain and glory are a violation of international norms. In contrast, world history is full of the deeds of conquerors. The ruthless conquests of Alexander the Great and the Roman legions are still glorified in film and fiction. Aśoka ruled in the historical epoch of the conquering hero during the Warring

States period in China. He nonetheless rejected the heroic conception of aggressive war. As a Buddhist king, Aśoka was perhaps the first ruler of a hegemonic military power to reject unilaterally the realist view of war.

Aśoka, however, was no pacifist. His special role as king was to preserve the Dharma and protect the Sangha and the people. And, as sovereign, he used his power to secure the peace. He erected stone pillars throughout his kingdom, and on one of the pillars wrote:

[Aśoka] Beloved-of-the-Gods thinks that even those who do wrong should be forgiven where forgiveness is possible. Even the forest people, who live in Beloved-of-the-Gods' domain, are entreated and reasoned with to act properly. They are told that despite his remorse [at the slaughter of innocents in his past] Beloved-of-the-Gods has the power to punish them if necessary, so that they should be ashamed of their wrong and not be killed. Truly, Beloved-of-the-Gods desires non-injury, restraint and impartiality to all beings, even where wrong has been done. Now it is conquest by Dharma that Beloved-of-the-Gods considers to be the best conquest ... This conquest has been won everywhere, and it gives great joy – the joy which only conquest by Dharma can give.

(Aśoka, *Fourteen Rock Edicts*, #13)

As the model Buddhist ruler, Aśoka insisted that he “desires non-injury, restraint and impartiality to all beings,” but he also had “the power to punish if necessary.” He did not disband his army; he remained the dominant superpower in his region.⁷ Despite his hegemonic power, Aśoka strove to be merciful and compassionate towards criminals and other people within or beyond his borders. For Aśoka, the goal of sovereign power was to teach and encourage virtue and wisdom. Nevertheless, aggressors, whether internal or external, were not to be passively tolerated; criminals had to be punished and invaders repelled. In other edicts, Aśoka assured people on his borders that they need not fear conquest because he wished only to spread the Dharma. Although he had a missionary zeal, he also insisted on mutual respect among religions.

In short, these are the political lessons we can draw from the idealized rule of Aśoka: trust the people, provide social services that secure their basic needs, and treat them with compassion; support the Sangha, for it preserves and teaches the Dharma; defend the innocent against all transgressors (but never with hatred or malice); deter and prevent aggression when possible; recognize and acknowledge the harm to the victims of aggression; and punish but also forgive the transgressors.

The Theravāda Tripartite Political System

The essence of the Aśokan model of politics, and the basic structure of all future Aśokan societies, is a tripartite relationship between the Sangha, the ruler, and the people.⁸ The monastic Sangha is one of the core institutions that make up

the basic structure of Theravāda Buddhist societies. The Sangha is a central institution because monastic life is the primary path to enlightenment. However, monastic practice is about more than individual growth. In addition, this community of monks preserves and passes on the teachings of the Buddha. The people cherish and respect the Sangha. As a result, the endorsement of the Sangha is essential to the perceived legitimacy of sovereign power. A ruler may have *de facto* power, but the people look to the Sangha to affirm the legitimate authority of the ruler.

On the other hand, the Sangha also relies on the ruler for support, and its official social/political position is easily reinforced or undermined by the ruler. In addition to providing security for the people, the ruler is the protector of the Sangha. Although the Sangha serves as a check and balance on sovereign political power, its political power comes from both the ruler and the people. For its authority and prestige, the Sangha must represent Buddhist ideals and its monks must live a more meditative and virtuous life. If the people think that the monks are corrupt or unfaithful to their monastic vows, the Sangha loses the respect of the people and thus its moral authority. The people, the Sangha, and the ruler are thus all mutually dependent.

The Sangha preserves the Dharma and serves the religious needs of the people, but it also plays an essential role in checking and legitimizing the political power of the ruler. The Sangha is thus as much a part of the basic structure of society as the ministries of the government. Without the ministers there is no effective power, no *de facto* authority, but without the Sangha there is no moral,

de jure, authority. According to Ian Harris, “it is perhaps not too much of an exaggeration to suggest that a healthy functioning Buddhist polity is one in which the respective powers of king and *Sangha* are held in a state of antagonistic symbiosis” (Harris 2007, 3).

It is also the case that the Aśokan ruler is often associated with a God or Buddha. In his Stone Edicts, Aśoka refers to himself as “Beloved-of-the Gods.” It is natural to think that the ruler’s position is dictated by superior karma and the Dharma [rightful] order of the world. A Buddhist king is supposed to be righteous and virtuous, and thus can be trusted by the people. Such an exalted being must be more enlightened and closer to Buddha than the people. The Aśokan ruler loves the people like a parent and the people trust their ruler to look after their interests. The king is the immediate source of civil order and security, but the king’s authority is rooted in the Ten Kingly Virtues of charity, morality, self-sacrifice, rectitude, gentleness, self-restriction, non-anger, non-violence, forbearance, and non-obstruction (Stengs 2009, 36; Swearer 2010, 263 n. 9). The legitimate authority of the king is ultimately and essentially based on the virtues of the king.

In Tibetan Buddhism, the political ruler is elevated further to a direct emanation of the Buddha of Compassion. The Dalai Lama has achieved enlightenment but has taken a bodhisattva vow to protect and care for the Tibetan people. The Dalai Lama is both the religious and political leader, and the Tibetan people trust the Dalai Lama unconditionally *because* the Dalai Lama is an incarnation of the Buddha of Compassion. The association of Buddha-nature

with the political leader is a natural extension of the Aśokan political model (Jackson 1989). The ruler's status and dignity is rooted in his enlightened rule, and enlightened rule implies enlightenment. An Aśokan ruler is thus always close to a living Buddha.

Absolute, but not unconditional, monarchy is the traditional corollary of the doctrine of Buddhist kingship. Although both Thailand and the Tibetan government in exile are now constitutional democracies, the people of these Buddhist lands have resisted the end of absolute monarchy. Even today, despite the official end of any constitutional political power, both the Thai king and the Dalai Lama have tremendous real power and influence with the people.

King Chulalongkorn, who ruled Siam/Thailand from 1868 to 1910, in response to petitions for the establishment of a constitutional monarchy, explains the status of a Buddhist king:

[The king] must always practice moderation and justice ... Contrary to what happened in Europe, Siamese kings have led the people so that both they and the country might be prosperous and happy ...

[The people] have more faith in the king than any members of parliament, because they believe the king more than anybody else practices justice and loves the people.

(Stengs 2009, 12)

The people accept the elevated and special status of the king; they trust, and indeed worship, the Thai king as a living manifestation of the Buddha. Mere elected ministers can never have the same exalted status as a Buddhist king or Dalai Lama. It is no wonder that the Tibetan people have resisted replacing the rule of the Dalai Lama with democracy.

The current Dalai Lama, in particular, strongly supports democracy, and the rule of law (where no person, even the Dalai Lama, is above the law), but the Tibetan people have consistently resisted his introduction of democratic rule. As John Powers explains,

After centuries of rule by lamas believed to be manifestations of Buddhas, the [the Dalai Lama's] proposal to grant effective power in merely human representatives struck many Tibetans as a misguided idea, since ordinary humans could be expected to pursue petty goals, engage in political maneuvering for themselves and their associates, and sometimes put their own welfare ahead of that of the people ... The people's resistance to his initiative indicates how foreign democratic principles remain to many Tibetans.

(Powers 1998, 193–6)

In response, Tibetan primary schools in Dharamsala, India, introduced courses on democratic theory and practice to help change attitudes of the next generations. The Tibetan exile government also sponsors "Democracy Days,"

where the schoolchildren join the community, listening to patriotic speeches on human rights and Buddhist principles, and sing songs in praise of democracy.

There are preconditions for democracy. Democracy presupposes a high level of civic trust, perhaps a robust civil society, and, since one cannot simply rely on the virtue of elected politicians, checks and balances on political power. Democratic sensibilities also involve a robust respect for minority rights and respect for freedom of conscience; otherwise majority rule is just a new form of tyranny.

Rousseau, Buddhism, and the General Will

Rousseau's account of the general will provides a theoretical framework for a Buddhist conception of democratic political legitimacy. Rousseau emphasizes how easily democratic elections can collapse into a mere factional battle of interest groups. Instead of a society with a shared general will and a shared sense of a common good, it is too easy to remain in a more or less constrained war of faction against faction. Rousseau argues that, for there to be a just society, first a collection of individuals must be transformed into a unified people – a people that share an identity and a common conception of the good.

Rousseau distinguishes the mere aggregation of individual preferences, which he calls the “will of all,” from a unifying and shared “general will”: “There is often a great difference between the will of all and the general will. The latter considers only the general interest, whereas the former considers private interest and is merely the sum of private wills” (1987, Bk II, ch. III). Democratic elections often

reflect “intrigues and partial associations” which actually undermine the general will. Laws based on majority power alone often undermine social unity and justice. For Rousseau, by definition, “the general will is always right and always tends toward the public utility. However, it does not follow that the deliberations of the people always have the same rectitude” (ibid.). If democratic elections function simply as tools of competing factional interests, there is no reason to assume that the results reflect a common good or a shared purpose. Indeed, a majority vote does not in any way check the potential tyranny of the majority. These are the same concerns about democracy expressed by the Thai and Tibetan peoples.

Rousseau argues that elections should not be a battle of competing preferences. The goal of elections should be the discovery of a shared general will. The citizen casting a vote should not ask, “What will serve my individual interests most?” Instead, the citizen should ask, “What policy choice advances the common good that we all share?”

When a law is proposed in the people’s assembly ... what is asked of them is not whether they approve or reject, but whether or not it conforms with the general will that is theirs. Each man, in giving his vote, states his opinion on this matter, and the declaration of the general will is drawn from the counting of votes.

(1987, Bk IV, ch. II)

The idea here is simple but easily lost. If laws obligate all citizens equally, political commitments and obligations must be mutual, must be equitable and promote a common and public good, and must apply to all equally (Ibid., Bk II, chs. IV and VI).

The shift of focus to the common good provides an apt model for a Buddhist democracy. The interconnectedness of our lives, and rejection of narrow self-interest, is at the core of the Buddhist worldview. Indeed, Rousseau's conception of the shared general will of the people is actually in conflict with Western individualism. For Rousseau, the key to turning individuals into a people is converting self-love and vanity into patriotism and nationalism. This is clearly a dangerous path; it replaces civil competition with international competition; it replaces interpersonal conflict with war. Buddhism offers an alternative vision of a general will that is based on a rejection of both delusional self-interest and militant nationalism. Buddhism also rejects preference satisfaction as the key to happiness. The key to happiness is instead the recognition of the centrality of relationships and the necessity of mutual support. The idea of the general will actually fits Buddhism better than it fits Western individualism. In fact, it is a natural corollary to the traditional Buddhist conception of political legitimacy. The righteous laws and just decrees of an Aśokan king must serve and reflect the good of the people, and as such reflect the general will of the people.

Rousseau also argues that significant economic inequality inevitably leads to social and political inequality. Inequality is thus one of the most significant obstacles to a shared sense of a common good and to laws rooted in a general

will (1987, Bk II, ch. XI). Similarly, for Buddhists, basic material goods are necessary for health and life, but luxuries and ever increasing material consumption do not bring greater happiness. Social and political structures should secure a satisfactory minimum for all, and surpluses should be used to promote the common good.⁹

Creating, Sustaining, and Enforcing the General Will

Political institutions, political officials, and citizens (when enacting legislation) need to be guided by a general will that overrides our private interests. Of course, it is not easy for people to think of others before themselves and the common good instead of private gain. As a result, Rousseau emphasizes the need for an inspirational and charismatic leader (a great legislator) to inspire and unify individuals into a people (1987, Bk II, chs. VI and VII). In a similar vein, we have seen how the Dalai Lama instituted “Democracy Days” to inspire his people to be self-governing and identify with the common good.

Rousseau also defends the coercive authority of the general will: “whoever refuses to obey the general will will be forced to do so by the entire body. This means merely that he will be forced to be free” (1987, Bk I, ch. VII). Rousseau is concerned with the justification of sovereign power. Laws are enforced. If the laws are based on shared interests and a shared general will, then we also authorize the necessary coercive power of the state. Buddhism is not focused on liberty, but a similar logic applies to a Buddhist justification of coercive laws. If law is necessary for the common good and prevents serious harm, then

disobeying the law harms others and is thus unwholesome. It is best, of course, to obey just laws because it is the just and virtuous thing to do. Nonetheless, the enforcement of justice promotes wholesome conduct. To quote Aśoka again, “it is conquest by Dharma that Beloved-of-the-Gods considers to be the best,” but “Beloved-of-the-Gods has the power to punish [wrongdoers] if necessary, so that they should be ashamed of their wrong and not be killed” (Aśoka, *Fourteen Rock Edicts*, #13). Laws are justified because they are necessary for the common good, promote wholesome conduct, and protect innocents from harm. Since these are ends that we all share, we cannot object to the enforcement of law. Coercive law, authorized by a shared general will, forces us to do what we really will. “This means merely that [we] will be forced to be [good]” (Rousseau 1987, Bk I, ch. VII). More needs to be said to flesh out Buddhist justifications of legal authority and police powers. The enforcement of law, however, is a commonplace of Buddhist societies. Indeed, monasteries have always enforced the Vinaya code, and large monastic communities have also exercised policing powers. A comprehensive account of Buddhist political theory would explore more fully Buddhist justifications of legal authority.

As the Shambhalan approach and Hume rightly emphasize, an enlightened people would not need a coercive legal system at all. The need for enforceable law is always a response and reaction that marks the need for progress. Nonetheless, if we focus on a theory of justice for the basic structure of society, we do not need to assume a fully enlightened citizenry. For a just society, people must care about justice, and they must appreciate that law and

political institutions must reflect a general will. A just people, however, need not be fully virtuous or enlightened. It is much easier to recognize what is right, and vote for laws that serve the general will, than it is to act rightly on one's own. For example, it is easier to vote for a law that redistributes wealth, including one's own, than it is voluntarily to give away a substantial portion of one's wealth. It is easier for people to support comprehensive health-care reform than personally to fund health-care charities. Collective action through legislation is also often the most effective means of promoting the common good. Building social, economic, and political institutions on a conception of shared and equitable common good is especially congenial to Buddhist sensibilities.

Buddhism has always embraced a conception of government for the people, and, historically, the Sangha has served as a check on political power. Representative government, by means of free and fair elections, is another means of holding rulers accountable. In a Buddhist democracy, the people must fulfill the role of the Sangha as a political check on the legal power of the rulers. The monastic Sangha is replaced with the more expansive conception of the Sangha, which embraces the entire Buddhist community. Similarly, a Supreme Judicial Court (which limits legislative and executive power, protects minority rights, and enforces the constitution) is fully compatible with Buddhist principles and provides a contemporary analogue of the Aśokan Sangha council. The members of the court serve as a more enlightened special council, which limits the law to the boundary set by the idea of a just and equitable general will. Instead of the "antagonistic symbiosis" of the respective powers of king and

Sangha, democratic elections and a constitutional court provide limits on political power.¹⁰

In this way, Buddhism can function like a “civil religion” that provides the foundation for a shared commitment to a common, equitable, and just society (Rousseau 1987, Bk IV, ch. VIII). The conception of Buddhism as a civil religion, however, does not provide an adequate model for a pluralistic society. An essential question, for future inquiry, is how this Rousseauian model of politics can be modified to incorporate Buddhist conceptions of toleration, inclusion, and pluralism (Fu and Wawrytko 1991; Kiblinger 2005; Hershock 2006).

Conclusion

The Shambhalan political vision emphasizes the necessity of individual enlightenment. The Aśokan tripartite system emphasizes the role of government in creating an environment where the unenlightened people, the Sangha and the laity, can pursue greater enlightenment. The monastic Sangha also serves as an essential check and balance on the political power of the king. Government is indeed necessary, but the idea of the Aśokan king is out of step with contemporary democratic sensibilities. On the other hand, democracy, understood as simple mechanisms for aggregating competing individual preferences, is also out of step with Buddhist sensibilities. Rousseau offers an alternative conception of democracy as the rule of law based on a shared general will. The idea of the general will fits especially well with the Buddhist rejection of individualism and its alternative relational conception of the self.

As the Shambhalan vision makes clear, individual growth towards collective enlightenment is important. In a just democratic society, the general will must override factional interests and individualism. It would thus seem that a just and equitable democracy presupposes a partially enlightened people. The general will is itself a partial realization of the Shambhalan ideal. People need political institutions, but just politics also needs good people. Like all else, social justice and virtue, the political and the personal, are thoroughly interdependent.

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Notes

¹ See, e.g., Harris (2007); Hongladarom (1998); Ratnapala (1997); Smith (1978); Suksamran (1976); Swearer (2010); Terwiel (1984).

² In addition to scholarly and historical accounts of Buddhism, I am interested in the contemporary experience of Buddhism as reflected in more popular publications. For a discussion of Western Buddhism as supposedly opposed to authentic Asian Buddhism, see Quli (2009).

³ The summary of Hobbes's argument is extracted from *Leviathan*, especially chapters 6, 9–11, 13–15, and 17. My summary is also indebted to Peter Railton's political philosophy course (1982–6).

⁴ Trungpa (1995, 250). The Shambhala warrior must renounce and overcome inner obstacles to peace, especially fear, self-deception, and selfishness (*ibid.*, 236–9). In addition, Chogyam Trungpa defends a more Confucian vision that focuses on the priority of family life, the importance of one's ancestors, and the history of one's social relationships (*ibid.*, 148–51).

⁵ See Bhikkhu (2007–12).

⁶ My summary of Aśoka is based on Strong (1994, 1989).

⁷ For a discussion of Buddhist just war theory, see Cummiskey (2011); Jerryson and Juergensmeyer (2010); and Schliff (2011).

⁸ See references in note 1.

⁹ For Buddhist critiques of consumer capitalism, see Sivaraksa (1984); Hongladarom (1998); Thinley (2006); Loy (2003); and Sizemore and Swearer (1990). Focusing on overall production, as a corollary of consumption, does not indicate the well-being, contentment, or happiness of a people. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is thus not a reliable index of national flourishing and greater well-being. From a Buddhist perspective, we must instead focus on increasing Gross National Happiness (GNH). Bhutan has led the way in developing a workable GNH index which measures nine domains of human life that capture key areas of overall and collective human flourishing, including psychological well-being, health, education, and good governance. For an explanation of the domains and

the measurement tools used to construct a GNH index, see www.grossnationalhappiness.com/9-domains/. Buddhist economics also emphasizes sustainable development and “right livelihood” (see Essen 2010; Loy 2008, 140–1). Although Buddhism rejects consumerism and the GDP standard of success, it need not reject capitalism and markets as such. European socialism has shown that markets can coexist with a substantial commitment to equity, social services, and social solidarity, and perhaps even maximize GNH.

¹⁰ For an interesting discussion of constitutional democracy in Thailand, see Connors (2003). Connors (*ibid.*, 108) draws attention to the (mis)use of the concept of the general will in Thai discourse.