



**Are there “Human Rights”
in Buddhism?**

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Abstract

It is difficult to think of a more urgent question for Buddhism in the late twentieth century than human rights. Human rights issues in which Buddhism has a direct involvement, notably in the case of Tibet, feature regularly on the agenda in superpower diplomacy. The political, ethical and philosophical questions surrounding human rights are debated vigorously in political and intellectual circles throughout the world. Yet despite its contemporary significance, the subject has merited hardly a footnote in mainstream academic research and publication in the field of Buddhist Studies. Why is this? One reason would seem to be the lack of a precedent within Buddhism itself for discussing issues of this kind; scholars, by and large, continue to follow the tradition's own agenda, an agenda which appears to some increasingly medieval in the shadow of the twenty-first century. If Buddhism wishes to address the issues which are of concern to today's global community, it must begin to ask itself new questions alongside the old ones.

In the context of human rights, which is the theme of this paper, an important preliminary question would seem to be whether traditional Buddhism has any understanding of what is meant by "human rights" at all. Indeed, it may be thought that since the concept of "rights" is the product of an alien cultural tradition it would be utterly inappropriate to speak of rights of any kind - "human" or otherwise - in a Buddhist context. Even if it was felt that these objections were overstated, and that the issue of human rights does have a legitimate place on the Buddhist agenda, there would still remain the separate and no less difficult question of how human rights were to be grounded in Buddhist doctrine, particularly in the light of the fact that the tradition itself provides little precedent or guidance in this area.

This paper offers a preliminary exploration of the questions raised in the paragraph above. It concludes that it is legitimate to speak of both "rights" and "human rights" in Buddhism, and proposes a ground for human rights in Buddhist doctrine.

Introduction

In the autumn of 1993 the Parliament of the World's Religions met in Chicago to determine whether a consensus on basic moral teachings could be found among the religions of the world. The meeting was attended by representatives of the major world religions as well as ethnic and other minority groups. Representatives of many Buddhist schools, including Theravada, Mahayana, Vajrayana, and Zen were present and the main closing address was given by the Dalai Lama in Grant Park on September 4th.

One of the major fruits of this interfaith convention was a document known as the Declaration towards a Global Ethic.¹ The Global Ethic sets out the fundamental moral principles to which it is thought all religions subscribe. Many of these principles concern human rights, and the Global Ethic sees the universal recognition of human rights and dignity by the religions of the world as the cornerstone of a "new global order."

A related aim of the Global Ethic was to provide "the basis for an extensive process of discussion and acceptance which we hope will be sparked off in all religions."² The present paper is a contribution to this process from a Buddhist perspective. Its aims are limited to an exploration of some of the basic issues which must be addressed if a Buddhist philosophy of human rights is to develop. I say "develop" because Buddhism seems to lack such a philosophy at present. Buddhism is a latecomer to the cause of human rights, and for most of its history has been preoccupied with other concerns. It might be suggested, in defense of Buddhism, that concern for human rights is a postreligious phenomenon which has more to do with secular ideologies and power-politics than religion, and it is therefore unreasonable to accuse Buddhism of neglect in this area.³ I will suggest below that such an understanding of human rights is mistaken, but leaving the specific issue of human rights to one side there is no doubt that Buddhism lags far behind religions such as Christianity and Islam in developing the framework for a social

¹ The text of the Declaration, along with commentaries and supplementary information is available in Küng and Kuschel, (eds) (1993).

² Küng and Kuschel (eds) (1993:8).

³ For a range of cultural and ideological perspectives on human rights see Pollis and Schwab (1979).

gospel within which questions of this kind can be addressed. For such an intellectually dynamic tradition Buddhism is a lightweight in moral and political philosophy. A fig-leaf of a kind may be found in the suggestion that since much Buddhist literature remains untranslated there may be hidden treasures in these areas awaiting discovery. Such appeals to the unknown, however, lack credibility. For one thing, it would be curious if only texts on these subjects had been lost to history while literature on all manner of other topics abounds. Nor can it be a coincidence that these subjects are absent from the traditional monastic curricula. The absence of a discipline of philosophical ethics in Indian culture as a whole makes it much more likely that Buddhism simply invested little time in questions of these kinds.⁴

Political events in the course of this century, however, have forced the issue of human rights to the top of the agenda.⁵ The Chinese invasion of Tibet, the bitter ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, and the experience of military dictatorship in countries such as Burma have all provided contemporary Buddhism with first-hand experience of the issues at stake. Another development which has done much to focus attention on social and political themes is the emergence of “socially engaged Buddhism,” a movement whose very name implies a critique of the more traditional (presumably “disengaged”) forms of Buddhism. Leading Asian and Western Buddhists now routinely express their concern about social injustice in the Western vocabulary of human rights. What I wish to consider here is how appropriate this language is for Buddhism, and what grounds there are for supposing that Buddhism is committed to the cause of “human rights” or has any clear understanding of what the concept means. Given the lack of intellectual effort down the centuries in articulating, promoting and defending rights of the kind which the world (and especially the West) is now called upon to secure for oppressed groups like the Tibetans, the more cynical might suggest that this late conversion to the cause is born more of

⁴ On the absence of ethics in Hinduism see Creel (1977:20ff).

⁵ In spite of its contemporary importance, however, little appears to have been written on the subject from a specifically Buddhist perspective. The only monograph on the subject appears to be Perera (1991). Panikkar (1982:76n) refers to a UNESCO Symposium which took place in Bangkok in 1979 entitled *Meeting of Experts on the Place of Human Rights in Cultural and Religious Traditions*, which apparently included discussion of Buddhism. I have as yet been unable to obtain a copy of the Final Report SS-79/CONF. 607/10 of 6 February 1980.

self-interest than a deep and long-standing commitment to social justice. In calling for respect for human rights today, then, is Buddhism simply riding on the coat-tails of the West or is there, after all, a commitment to human rights in Buddhist teachings?

My theme in this paper may be summed up as the conceptual and doctrinal basis for human rights in Buddhism. I am concerned with the intellectual bridgework which must be put in place if expressions of concern about human rights are to be linked to Buddhist doctrine. There are many aspects to this problem, but three related issues will be considered here: the concept of rights, the concept of human rights, and the question of how human rights are to be grounded in Buddhist doctrine. I ask first if the concept of “rights” is intelligible in Buddhism. To answer this question it will be necessary to gain some understanding of the origin of the notion in the West. Next I ask whether the Buddhist concept of human rights (if such a thing exists) is the same as the Western understanding. Finally I consider in what specific area of Buddhist teachings a doctrine of human rights might be grounded.⁶ Since the discussion is essentially theoretical, detailed reference will not be made to particular Buddhist cultures or schools, to specific human rights “abuses,” or to the human rights “record” of particular regimes.⁷

Before turning to these issues a preliminary point must be made about Buddhism itself. In speaking of “Buddhism” I should make clear that I am writing with reference to an abstraction which might be termed “classical” Buddhism. This abstraction is neither the same as nor different from Buddhism in any historical or cultural context. It is not meant to represent the views of any sect and is broad enough to include both Theravada and Mahayana schools. The justification for this fiction lies in the belief that whatever concept of human rights we regard Buddhism as holding must be one which is universal in form. The essence of any doctrine of human rights is its unrestricted scope, and it would be as strange to have distinct “Theravada,” “Tibetan” and “Zen” doctrines of human rights as it would be to have “Catholic,” “Protestant” and “Eastern Orthodox”

⁶ On the analogous question of whether there is an “African” doctrine of human rights see Howard (1986).

⁷ For information on these empirical questions see Humana (1992), Hsiung (1985), Rupesinghe *et al* (1993), de Silva (1988), also *Human Rights in Developing Countries, Yearbook 1993* (Copenhagen, 1993: Nordic Human Rights Publications).

ones. To insist on the priority of cultural and historical circumstances would be tantamount to denying the validity of human rights as a concept.

Rights

The concept of a “right” has a long intellectual history in the West, and the contemporary notion of a right as an exercisable power vested in or held by an individual has its antecedents in a more impersonal understanding of what is objectively true or right. Etymologically, the English word “right” is derived from the Latin *rectus* meaning straight. *Rectus*, in turn, can be traced to the Greek *orektos* which means stretched out or upright. As Richard Dagger notes, “The pattern ... is for the notion of straightness to be extended from the physical realm to the moral - from *rectus* to *rectitude*, as it were.”⁸ In other words, the property of a physical object, namely that of being right, straight or upright, is applied metaphorically in a moral context. Dagger suggests:

By analogy with the physical sense, the primary moral sense of “right” was a standard or measure for conduct. Something was right - morally straight or true - if it met the standard of *rectitude*, or *rightness* ...

Once the idea of “rightness” had been transferred to the moral domain, the next development was to view it as denoting a personal entitlement of some kind. Dagger continues:

From here the next step was to recognize that actions taken “with right” or “by right” are taken as a matter of right. The transition is from the belief that I may do something because it is right, in other words, to the belief that I may do something because I have a right to do it ... Thus the concept of rights joins the concept of the right.⁹

The metaphorical moral usage of terms such as “right,” “straight” and “upright” (in opposition to “crooked,” “twisted” and “bent”) readily suggests itself to the mind. The rationale for the transition from the moral use of “right” to the notion of a right as a personal entitlement, however, is less obvious. Indeed, this development which took place in the West during the late middle

⁸ Dagger (1989:293). I am indebted to Dagger’s excellent paper throughout this section.

⁹ Dagger (1989:294), original emphasis.

ages, and which has been described as the “watershed”¹⁰ in the history of “right,” may be a phenomenon which is culturally unique. The evolution of the concept in this direction occurs sometime between Aquinas in the thirteenth century and the jurists Suarez and Grotius in the seventeenth. The modern usage appears clearly in Hobbes, writing in the middle of the seventeenth century, and the idea of a right as a personal power occupies center stage in political theory from this time on.

As part of this evolution in the concept of a right the notion of natural rights comes to prominence towards the end of the seventeenth century, notably in the writings of John Locke. The belief that there are natural rights flows from the recognition of human equality, one of the great ideals of the Age of Revolution. Natural rights are inalienable: they are not conferred by any judicial or political process nor can they be removed by these or other means. These natural rights of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are the forerunner of the contemporary notion of human rights.

Two questions might be asked concerning the evolution of the doctrine of natural rights in the West. First, why did it take so long for the concept of natural rights to appear? The answer seems to lie in the fact that for much of Western history “rights” were closely tied to social status, and were essentially a function of position or role in society. A hierarchical social structure, such as was predominant in Roman and medieval society, is antithetical to the notion of natural rights. In these circumstances a person’s duties and responsibilities are determined fundamentally by the office they hold (lord, citizen, slave), offices which are to a large extent hereditary. It was only when the hierarchical model was challenged and replaced by an egalitarian one that the idea of natural rights began to gain ground.

The second and more important question for our present purposes is: Does the part played by the unique cultural matrix of social political and intellectual developments in the Enlightenment mean that human rights are essentially a function of the historical process? This conclusion need not follow, for while it may be said that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the notion of natural

¹⁰ Finnis (1980:206).

rights was “an idea whose time had come,” the idea itself was not entirely new. The influence of Christian doctrine can be seen in several respects,¹¹ such as the belief (ultimately derived from Judaism) of a “universal moral law rooted in the righteousness of God.”¹² Since human beings are created in the image of God and loved by him as individuals each is worthy of dignity and respect. Furthermore, since each is a member of the human community under God, all other memberships (tribe, state, nation) are secondary.¹³ Apart from Christianity, ideas about the just treatment of individuals on the basis of their common humanity are found in a secular context in Stoicism and the writings of Cicero and Seneca.¹⁴ The philosophical justification for a doctrine of human rights has thus always been available, although the ground in which this seed might flourish - a particular combination of social, political and intellectual developments - has not.

So much for historical background. What of contemporary theories of rights? The concept of a right has been analyzed in a number of ways, as evidenced by the extensive interdisciplinary literature on the subject spanning diverse fields such as politics, law, philosophy and history. Within this discourse of rights there is no single definition of a right which commands universal assent. For our present purposes, however, a basic understanding of the concept will suffice. We noted above that a right is something personal to an individual: it may be thought of as something an individual has.¹⁵ What the holder of a right has is a benefit or entitlement of some

¹¹ Stackhouse lists five (1984:35ff). Little (1988) shows the dependency of the modern Western secular and liberal ideology on Christian theology by tracing the historical connection between the Christian concept of conscience and the intellectual framework within which the American doctrines of liberty and religious freedom emerged in the eighteenth century in the writings of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. He suggests that this Western framework applies relatively unproblematically to Buddhism and Islam, and notes in general: “Thus, current human rights formulations, along with the important notions that underlie them, are by no means necessarily irrelevant to cultures outside the West” (1988:31). For perspectives on human rights from the world’s religions see Rouner (1988) and Swidler (1982). Issues concerning religion and rights are discussed by Bradney (1993). A commentary on the *Universal Declaration* from the perspective of Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam may be found in *Human Rights and Religions in Sri Lanka*, published by the Sri Lanka Foundation (Colombo, 1988). The Buddhist commentary by Perera was republished separately in 1991.

¹² Stackhouse (1984:35)

¹³ Stackhouse (1984:36).

¹⁴ For a survey see Carlyle and Carlyle (1950)

¹⁵ Finnis (1980:208).

kind, and at the most general level this is an entitlement to justice. This entitlement may be analyzed into two main forms for which there are corresponding rights: rights which take the form of a claim (claim-rights), and rights which take the form of a liberty (liberty-rights).¹⁶ A claim-right is the benefit which A enjoys to impose upon B a positive or negative requirement. A liberty-right is the benefit which A enjoys of being immune from any such requirement being imposed by B.¹⁷ This basic understanding of a right may be summed up in the following working definition: a right is a benefit which confers upon its holder either a claim or a liberty. One important feature of any right is that it provides a particular perspective on justice, in that the right-holder always stands in the position of beneficiary. This subjective aspect of the entitlement, which, as we have seen, appeared early in the history of the concept, remains crucial to the modern understanding of a right. This is brought out in the following definition by Finnis:

In short, the modern vocabulary and grammar of rights is a many-faceted instrument for reporting and asserting the requirements or other implications of a relationship of justice from the point of view of the person(s) who benefit(s) from that relationship. It provides a way of talking about 'what is just' from a special angle: the viewpoint of the 'other(s)' to whom something (including, inter alia, freedom of choice) is owed or due, and who would be wronged if denied that something.¹⁸

The above brief review of the Western concept of a right was required as a preliminary to an assessment of its relevance to Buddhism. We are now in a position to ask whether the concept of a right is found in Buddhism. If it is, then talk of human rights in Buddhism seems legitimate.¹⁹ If it is not, there is a danger of anachronistically foisting onto the tradition a concept which is the product of an alien culture.²⁰

¹⁶ The most influential modern analysis of rights is that by Hohfeld (1964).

¹⁷ Finnis (1980:199-205).

¹⁸ Finnis (1980:205), original emphasis.

¹⁹ Perera's discussion of Buddhism and human rights does not address these questions, and seems to assume that the concept of rights and human rights as understood in the *Universal Declaration* are directly applicable to canonical Buddhism.

²⁰ For the view that moral values are determined by culture, as maintained by many anthropologists, see Ladd (ed.) (1983). The defensibility of a specific cultural custom (female circumcision) from a human rights perspective is discussed by James (1994).

Buddhism and Rights

We took our cue for the discussion of rights in the West from etymology, and perhaps we can glean something further from this source. Above it was noted that the English word “right” is derived from the Latin *rectus* meaning straight. Both “right” and *rectus* themselves, however, have a more remote ancestor in the Sanskrit *rju* (straight or upright). The equivalent form in Pali is *uju* (or *ujju*) meaning “straight, direct; straightforward, honest, upright.”²¹ It would therefore appear that both the objective sense (“straight”) and the metaphorical moral sense (“rectitude”) of the word “right” referred to earlier occur in Buddhist as well as Western languages. Despite a common Indo-European etymology, however, there is no word in Sanskrit or Pali which conveys the idea of a “right” or “rights,” understood as a subjective entitlement.²²

Does this mean that the concept of rights is alien to Buddhist thought? Not necessarily. Alan Gewirth has pointed out that cultures may possess the concept of rights without having a vocabulary which expresses it. He suggests that it is “important to distinguish between having or using a concept and the clear or explicit recognition and elucidation of it ... Thus persons might have and use the concept of a right without explicitly having a single word for it.”²³ Gewirth claims that the concept of rights can be found in feudal thought, Roman law, Greek philosophy, the Old Testament, and in primitive societies. In connection with the last Finnis points out that anthropological studies of African tribal regimes of law have shown that “the English terms ‘a right’ and ‘duty’ are usually covered by a single word derived from the form normally translated as ‘ought.’” He suggests that the best English translation in these cases is “due” because “‘due’ looks both ways along a juridical relationship, both to what one is due to do, and to what is due to one.”²⁴

It seems, then, that the concept of a right may exist where a word for it does not. Could this be the case in Buddhism? In

²¹ Pali Text Society Pali-English Dictionary, *uju* and *ujju*.

²² On the concept of rights in Hinduism and the meaning of *adhikaara*, see Bilimoria (1993), also Creel (1977:19). In Buddhist languages the notion of rights may be distributed among a variety of terms, as perhaps, in Latin among the words *auctoritas*, *potestas*, *dominium*, *iurisdictio*, *proprietas*, *libertas* and *ius* (Dagger, 1989:291).

²³ Quoted in Dagger (1989:286).

²⁴ Finnis (1980:209).

Buddhism what is due in any situation is determined by reference to Dharma. Dharma determines what is right and just in all contexts and from all perspectives. With respect to social justice the Rev Vajiragnana explains:

Each one of us has a role to play in sustaining and promoting social justice and orderliness. The Buddha explained very clearly these roles as reciprocal duties existing between parents and children; teachers and pupils; husband and wife; friends, relatives and neighbors; employer and employee; clergy and laity ... No one has been left out. The duties explained here are reciprocal and are considered as sacred duties, for - if observed - they can create a just, peaceful and harmonious society.²⁵

From this it would seem that Dharma determines not just “what one is due to do” but also “what is due to one.” Thus through A’s performance of his Dharmic duty B receives that which is his “due” or, we might say, that to which he is “entitled” in (under, through) Dharma. Since Dharma determines the duties of husbands and the duties of wives,²⁶ it follows that the duties of one correspond to the entitlements or “rights” of the other. If the husband has a duty to support his wife, the wife has a “right” to support from her husband. If the wife has a duty to look after her husband’s property, the husband has a “right” to the safe-keeping of his property by his wife. If under Dharma it is the duty of a king (or political authority) to dispense justice impartially, then subjects (citizens) may be said to have a “right” to just and impartial treatment before the law.

Should it be concluded, then, that the notion of a right is present in classical Buddhism? The answer depends on the criteria adopted for “having” a concept. Dagger sets out the options:

If one is willing to look primarily for the idea or the notion, however it may be expressed, then one can confidently say that the concept of rights is virtually as old as civilization itself.

On the other hand:

If one insists that the form of expression is crucial ... so that a concept cannot be said to exist unless there is a word or phrase that

²⁵ Vajiragnana (1992)

²⁶ See, for example, the *Sigaalovaadasutta*.

distinguishes it from other concepts, then one would have to say that the concept of rights has its origin in the middle ages.²⁷

I think our conclusion should be that the concept of rights is implicit in classical Buddhism in the normative understanding of what is “due” among and between individuals. Under Dharma, husbands and wives, kings and subjects, teachers and students, all have reciprocal obligations which can be analyzed into rights and duties. We must qualify this conclusion, however, by noting that the requirements of Dharma are expressed in the form of duties rather than rights. In other words, Dharma states what is due in the form “A husband should support his wife” as opposed to “Wives have a right to be maintained by their husbands.” Until rights as personal entitlements are recognized as a discrete but integral part of what is due under Dharma, the modern concept of rights cannot be said to be present. In this respect, however, Buddhism is far from unique, and a similar comment could be made about many other cultures and civilizations. Finnis points out with respect to Roman law:

[I]t is salutary to bear in mind that the modern emphasis on the powers of the right-holder, and the consequent systematic bifurcation between ‘right’ ... and ‘duty’, is something that sophisticated lawyers were able to do without for the whole life of classical Roman law.²⁸

He also suggests, rightly I think, that “there is no cause to take sides as between the older and the newer usages, as ways of expressing the implications of justice in a given context.”²⁹ A right is a useful concept which provides a particular perspective on justice. Its correlative, duty, provides another. These may be thought of as separate windows onto the common good which is justice or, in the context of Buddhism, Dharma. It would therefore be going too far to claim that the notion of rights is “alien” to Buddhism or that Buddhism denies that individuals have “rights.”

In sum it might be said that in classical Buddhism the notion of rights is present in embryonic form although not yet born into history. Whether anything like the Western concept of rights has, or would, appear in the course of the historical evolution of Buddhism is a question for specialists in the various Buddhist cultures to

²⁷ Dagger (1989:297)

²⁸ Finnis (1980:209)

²⁹ Finnis (1980:210)

ponder. In many respects the omens for this development were never good. Buddhism originated in a caste society, and the Asian societies where it has flourished have for the most part been hierarchically structured. MacIntyre, citing Gewirth, mentions that the concept of a right lacks any means of expression in Japanese “even as late as the mid-nineteenth century.”³⁰ The preconditions for the emergence of the concept of rights would seem to be egalitarianism and democracy, neither of which have been notable features of Asian polity before the modern era. On the other hand, a justification for the rejection of hierarchical social structures is not hard to find in Buddhism - one need look only at the Buddha’s critique of caste.³¹ Buddhism also holds, in the doctrine of no-self, that all individuals are equal in the most profound sense.³² Like the Christian doctrine that all men are created equal before God this would appear to be fertile ground for a doctrine of natural rights. What seems to have been lacking in both faiths, but perhaps more so in Buddhism, was the will to incarnate this theoretical vision of man in the flesh of historical institutions.

Human Rights

In the preceding section attention was focused on the concept of a right. Here we consider what it means to characterize certain rights as human rights,³³ and pursue further the discussion initiated in the preceding section as to whether Western notions of human rights are compatible with Buddhism.³⁴

The point has already been made that what are today called human rights were originally spoken of as “natural” rights, in other words, rights which flow from human nature. In the seventeenth century philosophers and statesmen began to define these rights and

³⁰ MacIntyre (1981:69). Cf. de Bary on the Chinese neologisms which have been coined to express these concepts (1988:183).

³¹ The institution of caste is criticized in numerous early discourses, notably the *So.nada.n.dasutta*.

³² Carrithers (1985) suggests that the Buddhist concept of the “self” (which he relates to Mauss’s concept of the “moi”) is one which is easily transportable across cultural frontiers. This enhances the prospects for a Buddhist doctrine of universal human rights.

³³ Useful discussions of the philosophical basis of human rights may be found in Donnelly (1985) and Nickel (1987).

³⁴ On how far the Western concept of human rights is relevant or applicable to other cultures see Panikkar (1982), Teson (1985), Milne (1986), Welch *et al* (1990).

enshrine them in early constitutions such as the “Fundamental Orders of Connecticut” as early as 1639. Documents of this kind inspired the publication of other declarations, charters and manifestos in a tradition which has continued into modern times. As an example of a modern charter of human rights we may take The Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations in December 1948. Since its promulgation this thirty-article code has been used as a model for many subsequent human rights charters.

What is the Buddhist position with respect to declarations of this kind? It may be useful to begin by asking whether Buddhism would endorse the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. The repeated calls by the Dalai Lama for respect for human rights give some reason to think that it would. The signing of the Global Ethic by many Buddhists also suggests that Buddhism has no reservations about subscribing to charters or manifestos which seek to secure universal human rights. Moreover, there seems to be nothing in any of the thirty articles to which Buddhism would take exception. Perera’s commentary on each of the thirty articles of the Universal Declaration shows them to be in harmony with early Buddhist teachings both in letter and in spirit. In his Foreword to the commentary Ananda Gurugé writes:

Professor Perera demonstrates that every single Article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights - even the labour rights to fair wages, leisure and welfare - has been adumbrated, cogently upheld and meaningfully incorporated in an overall view of life and society by the Buddha.³⁵

But how are these rights to be justified with reference to Buddhist teachings? In asking this question I am not seeking justification by reference to textual passages which seem to support the rights claimed. There are many passages in the Pali Canon, as Perera has ably demonstrated, which support the view that early Buddhist teachings were in harmony with the spirit of the Declaration. The justification required at this point has more to do with the philosophical presuppositions underlying these passages and the overall Buddhist vision of individual and social good.

³⁵ Perera (1991:xi).

The various declarations on human rights themselves rarely offer a justification for the rights they proclaim. MacIntyre observes dryly how “In the United Nations declaration on human rights of 1949 [sic] what has since become the normal UN practice of not giving good reasons for any assertion whatsoever is followed with great rigor.”³⁶ A gesture towards justification is sometimes made in recital clauses by reference to the “inherent dignity ... of all members of the human family” or some similar form of words. The Global Ethic, which provides a fuller statement than most, echoes the Universal Declaration in its call for “the full realization of the intrinsic dignity of the human person”.³⁷ It states: “We make a commitment to respect life and dignity, individuality and diversity, so that every person is treated humanely.” This is amplified as follows:

This means that every human being without distinction of age, sex, race, skin, color, physical or mental ability, language, religion, political view, or national or social origin possesses an inalienable and untouchable dignity. And everyone, the individual as well as the state, is therefore obliged to honor this dignity and protect it.³⁸

Elsewhere, as part of his dialogue with world religions, Küng makes a constructive suggestion on this point that students of Buddhism might do well to pay heed to:

Should not Buddhist thinkers, as they critically assess their own and alien traditions, make a more direct effort to establish an anthropology centered around human dignity (which the Buddha himself deeply respected)? Buddhists are fully aware that man can be adequately understood only as conditioned in every way, as a relational being within the totality of life and the cosmos. But should they not reflect more earnestly, especially in an ethical vein, on the problems of the unique, inviolable, noninterchangeable human self, with its roots in the past and its future destiny?³⁹

It is by no means apparent, however, how human dignity is to be grounded in Buddhist doctrine. The very words “human dignity” sound as alien in a Buddhist context as talk of rights. One looks in vain to the The Four Noble Truths for any explicit reference to human dignity, and doctrines such as no-self and impermanence

³⁶ MacIntyre (1981:69).

³⁷ *A Global Ethic*, p.14

³⁸ *A Global Ethic*, p.23, original emphasis.

³⁹ Küng (1986:383f), original emphasis.

may even be thought to undermine it. If human dignity is the basis of human rights Buddhism would seem to be in some difficulty when it comes to providing a justification for them. The theistic religions, on the other hand, seem much better equipped to provide an account of human dignity. Christians, Muslims and Jews typically refer to the ultimate source of human dignity as divine. Article one (paragraph 1700) of the most recent Catechism of the Catholic Church, for instance, states: “The dignity of the human person is rooted in his creation in the image and likeness of God.” Buddhism, clearly, would not wish to make such a claim. Küng notes how leading Buddhists at the Parliament of the World’s Religions felt called upon to protest at calls for “a unity of religions under God,” and at references to “God the Almighty” and “God the Creator” in invocations during the proceedings. He suggests, however, that these differences are reconcilable since the Buddhist concepts of “Nirvana, Shunyata and Dharmakaya ... fulfil analogous functions to the concept of God” and can be regarded by Christians as “parallel terms for the Absolute.”⁴⁰

It may or may not be the case that Mahayana schools recognize a transcendent reality which resembles the Christian concept of God as the Absolute, and there are those better qualified than myself to address such a question. Here I will make only three brief points regarding the problems which arise in regarding these things as the source of human dignity. The first is that since these concepts are understood differently by the main Mahayana schools they are unlikely to provide the common ground which is required as a foundation for human rights. The second is that it is difficult to see how any of these things can be the source of human dignity in the way that God can, since no school of Buddhism believes that human beings are created by them. The third point is that even if some metaphysical ground of the above kind can be identified in Mahayana Buddhism it still leaves the problem of how human dignity is to be grounded where Theravada Buddhism is concerned. For the Theravada, Nirvana is not a transcendent Absolute, nor do the concepts of “Shunyata and Dharmakaya” have anything like the meaning or significance they attain later. No grounding for human rights can be truly satisfactory, I would suggest, unless it unambiguously forms part of the core teachings of classical Buddhism as a whole.

⁴⁰ *A Global Ethic*, p.62f

One suggestion as to how human rights can be grounded in Buddhist doctrine has been made by Kenneth Inada. In a discussion of “The Buddhist Perspective on Human Rights,” Inada suggests “there is an intimate and vital relationship of the Buddhist norm or Dhamma with that of human rights.”⁴¹ He explains the relationship as follows:

Human rights is indeed an important issue, but the Buddhist position is that it is ancillary to the larger or more basic issue of human nature. It can be asserted that the Buddhist sees the concept of human rights as a legal extension of human nature. It is a crystallization, indeed a formalization, of the mutual respect and concern of all persons, stemming from human nature. Thus, human nature is the ultimate source, the basis from which all other attributes or characteristics are to be delineated. They all have their respective *raison d’etre* in it. They are reflections and even byproducts of it. The reason for assigning human nature the basic position is very simple. It is to give human relations a firm grounding in the truly existential nature of things: that is, the concrete and dynamic relational nature of persons in contact with each other, that which [sic] avoids being caught up in rhetorical or legalistic tangles.⁴²

Few would disagree with the proposition that human rights are grounded in human nature. Towards the end of the extract, however, Inada seems to move away from his initial suggestion that human nature is the “ultimate source” of human rights towards the view that the ultimate ground is the “dynamic relational nature of persons in contact with each other.” In other words, it is in the interrelatedness of persons rather than in the persons themselves that the justification for human rights is to be found. This is confirmed a little later:

Consequently, the Buddhist concern is focused on the experiential process of each individual, a process technically known as relational origination (*paticca-samuppada*). It is the great doctrine of Buddhism, perhaps the greatest doctrine expounded by the historical Buddha. It means that, in any life-process, the arising of an experiential event is a total, relational affair.⁴³

⁴¹ Inada (1982:71)

⁴² Inada (1982:70), paragraphs joined.

⁴³ Inada (1982:70).

How is the link between dependent-origination and human rights to be forged? The argument reaches its conclusion in the following passage:

Like a storm which consumes everything in its wake, an experience in terms of relational origination involves everything within its purview. Hence, the involvement of elements and, in our case, human beings as entities should not be in terms of mere relationship but rather a creative relationship which originates from the individual locus of existence. In other words, each individual is responsible for the actualization of an “extensive concern” for everything that lies in his or her path of experience. So, we may say that the sum total of the “extensive concerns” can be referred to as a mutually constituted existential realm, and it thereby becomes a fact that there will be mutual respect of fellow beings. It is on this basis that we can speak of the rights of individuals. These rights are actually extensions of human qualities such as security, liberty, and life.⁴⁴

In simple language, the argument seems to be as follows. Human beings, like everything else, are part of the relational process described in the doctrine of dependent-origination; since no-one exists independently we should look out for one another; looking out for one another means respecting each other’s rights; examples of the rights we should respect are security, liberty and life.⁴⁵

Although I have described this as an “argument” it is little more than a series of assertions. Working backwards, it is difficult to know what sense to give the concluding sentence: “These rights are actually extensions of human qualities such as security, liberty and life.” It is unclear what is meant by “human qualities” here. In what sense is security a “human quality” (perhaps a “need”)? Why is life described as a “quality” of a human being? Even granted that these things are “human qualities,” what does it mean to say that rights are

⁴⁴ Inada (1982:70f).

⁴⁵ An earlier attempt to ground Buddhist ethics in dependent-origination can be found in Macy (1979). Macy offers the Sarvodaya Shramadana, a self-help movement in Sri Lanka, as “A notable example of the ethics of *pa.ticca-samuppaada*,” but, like Inada, fails to explain how a moral imperative arises out of this doctrine. Also drawn to the seemingly magnetic doctrines of no-self and dependent-origination is Taitetsu Unno, whose 1988 article, supposedly about rights, is taken up almost entirely in providing a Pure Land perspective on these two doctrines. While these doctrines offer a congenial metaphysical backdrop for Buddhist ethics, they cannot provide a *moral* ground for rights. Harris (1994) expresses doubts that dependent-origination can provide a satisfactory basis for Buddhist ecology.

extensions of “human qualities”? In the first extract quoted above, Inada suggests that “the Buddhist sees the concept of human rights as a legal extension of human nature.” What is left unexplained, however, is how human nature (or “human qualities”) become legal rights. Do all “human qualities” extend into rights or only some? If so, which and why? Finally, if “human qualities” are what give rise to rights, why invoke the doctrine of dependent-origination?

The derivation of human rights from the doctrine of dependent-origination is a conjuring trick. From the premise that we live in “a mutually constituted existential realm” (we all live together) it has “thereby become a fact” that there will be “mutual respect of fellow beings.” In the twinkling of an eye, values have appeared from facts like a rabbit out of a hat. However, the fact that human beings live in relationship with one another is not a moral argument about how they ought to behave. By itself it offers no reason why a person should not routinely abuse the rights of others. Inada’s suggestion that human rights can be grounded in the doctrine of dependent-origination turns out to be little more than a recommendation that people should be nice to one another on the ground that we are “all in this together.”⁴⁶

The approach adopted by Perera is rather different. Perera’s main concern is to demonstrate that the articles of the Universal Declaration are adumbrated in early Buddhist teachings, rather than explore their philosophical foundations. He acknowledges that “Buddhism credits the human personality with a dignity and moral responsibility”⁴⁷ but does not explain fully whence this arises or how it provides a foundation for human rights. In a number of places he suggests certain possibilities regarding the source of human dignity, not all of which seem to be compatible. At one point he defines “the ethical assumption on which the Buddhist concept of human rights is founded” as the “fundamental consideration that all life has a desire to safeguard itself and to make itself comfortable and happy.”⁴⁸ Basing rights on desires, however, is problematic. One reason is that certain people, for example those who seek to end their lives through

⁴⁶ In a second essay on the subject (1990) Inada gives much less emphasis to dependent-origination and seems to want to ground human rights in compassion. However, the nature of the argument, and in particular the concluding paragraph, are far from clear.

⁴⁷ Perera (1991:28, cf.88)

⁴⁸ Perera (1991:29).

suicide, seem to lack the desire in question. Nor is it difficult to conceive of a justification for human rights abuses along the lines that the victims “no longer cared what happened to them.” If they themselves had no interest in their future, whose rights would have been violated? A deeper problem is that the mere existence of desires establishes nothing from a moral point of view. Desires are many and varied and can be met in manifold ways. Moral questions arise both at the level of whether a desire should be met and how it should be met. The identification of a desire may be a starting point for moral reflection, but it is certainly not its end.⁴⁹

On the preceding page Perera suggests an alternative foundation for human rights, one which links it to human dignity. He writes: “Buddhism posits, as Jean Jaques Rousseau did much later, that the essence of human dignity lies in the assumption of man’s responsibility for his own governance.”⁵⁰ No Buddhist sources are cited in support of this claim, and I believe it is unlikely that Buddhism would wish to link human dignity quite so closely to politics. Perhaps if this suggestion were developed a little further it would make reference to underlying human capacities such as reason and autonomy which enable men to constitute themselves into orderly societies, and then point to these as the underlying source of human dignity. While political institutions may be produced through the exercise of distinctively human capacities, however, it is unlikely that Buddhism would locate “the essence of human dignity” in their creation. According to the *Aggaññasutta*, the evolution of political societies is the consequence of depravity and decline, which makes them a dubious testament to human dignity.

Where then, should the foundations for a Buddhist doctrine of human rights be sought? The proper ground for a doctrine of human rights, I suggest, lies elsewhere than in the doctrine of dependent-origination, as suggested by Inada, or in either the desire for self-preservation or the acceptance of responsibility for self-government, as proposed by Perera. Perera, in fact, comes closest to what in my view is the true source of human rights in Buddhism in his commentary on Article 1.⁵¹ In discussing the first

⁴⁹ A further problem, although I believe it is ultimately a pseudo-problem, is that Buddhism sees desire as the cause of suffering. Desire would therefore seem an unlikely foundation for human rights.

⁵⁰ Perera (1991:28).

⁵¹ Article 1: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are

sentence of the Article (“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”) he comments that “Buddhahood itself is within the reach of all human beings ... and if all could attain Buddhahood what greater equality in dignity and rights can there be?” To focus attention upon the goal, I believe, is more promising than any of the other approaches considered thus far. Perera seems to grasp its significance in a remark towards the end of his commentary on Article 1. He writes:

It is from the point of view of its goal that Buddhism evaluates all action. Hence Buddhist thought is in accord with this and other Articles in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to the extent to which they facilitate the advancement of human beings towards the Buddhist goal.⁵²

I believe the above statement provides the key to understanding human rights from a Buddhist perspective. What is missing in Perera’s commentary, however, is the explicit linkage between the goal and human dignity, and it is this which I will now try to establish. What I will suggest in general is that the source of human dignity should be sought not in the analysis of the human condition provided by the first and second noble truths (the area where Buddhist scholarship has myopically focused its attention) but in the evaluation of human good provided by the third and fourth. Human rights cannot be derived from any factual non-evaluative analysis of human nature, whether in terms of its psycho-physical constitution (the five “aggregates” which lack a self), its biological nature (needs, urges, drives), or the deep structure of interdependency (*pa.ticca-samuppaada*). Instead the most promising approach will be one which locates human rights and dignity within a comprehensive account of human goodness, and which sees basic rights and freedoms as integrally related to human flourishing and self-realization.⁵³ This is because the source of human dignity in Buddhism lies nowhere else than in the literally infinite capacity of human nature for participation in goodness.⁵⁴

endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”

⁵² Perera (1991:24).

⁵³ A discussion of human nature and human good in Buddhism will be found in my forthcoming *Buddhism & Bioethics* (Macmillan, 1995).

⁵⁴ A more familiar way of making the same point in Buddhist terminology would be to say that all beings are potential Buddhas or possess the “Buddha-nature.”

The connection between human rights and human good can be illustrated by asking what the various declarations on human rights see to secure. Documents which speak of human rights commonly announce a list of specific rights and freedoms and proclaim them to be inviolable. The rights proclaimed by the Universal Declaration include the right to life, liberty, security of person, equality before the law, privacy, marriage and protection of family life, social security, participation in government, work, protection against unemployment, rest and leisure, a minimum standard of living, and enjoyment of the arts. The exercise of these rights is subject only to such general limitations as are necessary to secure due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and the requirements of morality, public order and general welfare (Article 29.2). Otherwise, the rights are expressed in categorical forms such as “Everyone has ...” and “No-one shall ...”. For example, Article 3: “Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.” And Article 4: “No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.” The document thus understands the rights it proclaims as both “universal” and exceptionless. Using the terminology introduced earlier it can be seen that some of these rights are claim rights while others are liberty rights. Article 2 confirms this when it speaks of an entitlement to both the “rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration.”⁵⁵

What do these rights and freedoms amount to? It might be said that they map the parameters of human “good-in-community.” In other words, these rights and freedoms are what is required if human beings are to lead fulfilled lives in society. Article 29.1 recognizes this when it observes “Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible.”⁵⁶ In the absence of human rights the scope for human development and fulfilment through social interaction is drastically reduced. The rights specified define and facilitate aspects of human fulfilment. The right to life is clearly fundamental since it is the condition for the enjoyment of all other rights and freedoms. The right to “liberty and security of person” (Article 3) is also basic to any understanding of human good. Without these minimum conditions the scope and opportunity for human fulfilment would be intolerably restricted. The same would apply in the case of slavery

⁵⁵ Emphasis added.

⁵⁶ Emphasis added.

(Article 4), torture (Article 5), and the denial of rights before the law (Article 6). It can also be seen that many of the detailed rights identified are actually derived from more fundamental ones. Article 3, for example, “No one shall be held in slavery,” is clearly implied in Article 2, “Everyone has the right to ... liberty.” It might thus be said that many of the thirty articles articulate the practical implications of a relatively small number of fundamental rights and freedoms which are the basis of the common good.

It may be noted that the Universal Declaration itself and modern charters like it do not offer a comprehensive vision of human good. This is not intended as a criticism, for the purpose of such charters is to secure only what might be termed the “minimum conditions” for human flourishing in a pluralistic milieu. The task of articulating a comprehensive vision of what is ultimately valuable in human life and how it is to be attained falls to the competing theories of human good found in religions, philosophies and ideologies. Buddhism provides one view of human nature and its fulfilment, Christianity another, secular philosophies a third. To pursue any of these different paths, however, requires the substructure known as “human rights,” a complex of fundamental rights and liberties which are the preconditions for the realization of the particular opportunities made available by the competing ideologies.

If the aim of human rights declarations is understood in the way outlined above then human rights is fundamentally a moral issue. Where there is no right to life, liberty and security of person, and where torture is routine, the opportunities for the realization of human good are greatly reduced. Freedom of religion (Article 18), for example, is vital to the Buddhist vision of individual and social good, and the consequences of the loss of these rights are all too obvious in Tibet. Human rights is thus an area in which religions have a legitimate and vital stake, and there is every reason why it would be proper for Buddhism both to endorse the Universal Declaration and call upon others to respect and implement it.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ In the view of Perera: “From the religious angle, it is possible to state that in this Declaration lie enshrined certain values and norms emphasized by the major religions of the world. Though not directly expressed, the basic principles of the Declaration are supported and reinforced by these religious traditions, and among them the contribution of the Buddhist tradition, to say the least, is quite outstanding” (1991:xiii). Though not wishing to deny that the early teachings support the principles of the Declaration, I do not

If religions have a legitimate stake in human rights, we might expect to find many of the rights and liberties spelled out in human rights charters present in either an express or implied form in their moral teachings. These typically include commandments or precepts forbidding killing, stealing, adultery, and lying, as do the first four of the Five Precepts. These evils are prohibited because it is immediately apparent that they are antithetical to human flourishing-in-community. The rationale for these prohibitions, I suggest, coincides to a large extent with that of the various human rights manifestos.⁵⁸ These manifestos, indeed, may be regarded as a translation of religious precepts into the language of rights. The process of casuistry can be seen at work in both. Just as a limited number of moral precepts can be expanded to meet the needs of different social situations (many of the extensive Vinaya rules, for example, have their source in a handful of moral precepts),⁵⁹ so the many articles in human rights charters are extrapolated from a comparatively small number of basic rights and freedoms.

It must be admitted there are grounds for scepticism towards the parallel which has just been suggested since it cannot be denied that the Buddhist precepts look and sound very different from contemporary declarations on human rights. The Buddhist precepts make no reference to “rights” at all, and are couched instead in the form of undertakings.⁶⁰ Let us examine what these undertakings involve. On the basis of our earlier analysis it would seem that “taking the precepts” in Buddhism is actually the formal acknowledgement of a subsisting duty, a duty which arises from Dharma. The person who takes the precepts is saying in effect “I hereby recognize my Dharmic duty not to do x,y, and z.” Since duties have their correlative in rights, however, rights must also be

agree that the contribution of the Buddhist *tradition* to the cause of human rights is in any way “outstanding.”

⁵⁸ In certain areas (such as the prohibition on alcohol and matters of sexual morality) the precepts go beyond the more limited aims of human rights charters. This is because Buddhism provides a particular vision of human good and also defines the practices required for its fulfilment.

⁵⁹ Keown (1992:33).

⁶⁰ Sometimes a contrast is drawn between the “voluntary” nature of the Buddhist precepts and the “commandments” of Christianity. While the format of the Buddhist precepts is certainly more appealing to liberal tastes, the distinction has little real meaning. The precepts apply whether or not they are formally “undertaken,” and are commandments in all but name.

implicit in the good the precepts seek to promote. We saw earlier that rights provide a way of talking about what is just and unjust from a special angle. We noted further that a person who has right has a benefit, a benefit which can be described as either a claim or a liberty. In the context of the precepts, then, the right-holder is the one who suffers from the breach of Dharmic duty when the precepts are broken. In the case of the first precept this would be the person who was unjustly killed. The right the victim has may therefore be defined as a negative claim-right upon the aggressor, namely the right not to be killed. In simple terms we might say that the victim has a right to life which the aggressor has a duty to respect.

That the translation between precepts and rights is accurate, and that the agreement between the two formulations is more than superficial or accidental, is supported by the authenticity with which the Dalai Lama was able to affirm the Global Ethic. Kuschel comments as follows:

Something else seems decisive to me: authenticity and humanity. The reason why the Dalai Lama's speech was so convincing, and indeed seized people's hearts, so that it was often interrupted by spontaneous applause, was that this man simply wanted to be an authentic Buddhist. His plea for mutual respect, dialogue and collaboration, for understanding between peoples and respect for creation, was not an adaptation to Christian or Western values, but came from the depths of his own Buddhist spirituality.⁶¹

Further evidence of the linkage between the Buddhist precepts and social justice is found in the Theravada tradition. Writing on the theme of "Justice in Buddhism" Vajiragnana states:

Man is responsible for society. It is he who makes it good or bad through his own actions. Buddhism, therefore, advocates a five-fold disciplinary code for man's training in order to maintain justice in society ... These five ... precepts are extremely important fundamental principles for promoting and perpetuating human welfare, peace and justice.⁶²

I suggest, then, that the apparent differences between the moral teachings of Buddhism and human rights charters is one of form rather than substance. Human rights can be extrapolated from Buddhist moral teachings in the manner described above using the

⁶¹ Küng and Kuschel (eds) (1993:104), original emphasis.

⁶² Vajiragnana (1992).

logic of moral relationships to illumine what is due under Dharma. A direct translation of the first four precepts yields a right to life, a right not to have one's property stolen, a right to fidelity in marriage, and a right not to be lied to. Many other human rights, such as the rights to liberty and security can either be deduced from or are extant within the general corpus of Buddhist moral teachings. A right not to be held in slavery, for example, is implicit in the canonical prohibition on trade in living beings.⁶³ These rights are the extrapolation of what is due under Dharma; they have not been "imported" into Buddhism but were implicitly present.

If modern conceptions of human rights and Buddhist moral teachings are related in the way I have suggested, certain conclusions follow for our understanding of the Buddhist precepts. If there are universal and exceptionless rights, as human rights charters affirm, there must be universal and exceptionless duties. If human rights such as a "right to life" (by which I understand a right not to have one's life taken unjustly) are exceptionless, there must also be an exceptionless duty to abstain from unjustly depriving a human being of life. The First Precept in Buddhism, therefore, should be understood as an exceptionless duty or moral absolute.

Is this reverse translation, from absolute human rights to absolute moral duties, supported by textual sources? There is every reason to think that it is. Such an understanding of the precept is clearly evident in classical Buddhism, which tirelessly reiterates the principle of the sanctity of life found in the pan-Indian teachings on non-harming (*ahi.msaa*¹), and which gives no reason to suppose that its moral precepts are to be understood as anything other than exceptionless norms. If, on the other hand, it is thought that the precepts are not to be understood as moral absolutes, then it is difficult to see what justification there can be for Buddhists to hold that there are universal and exceptionless human rights. It would be inconsistent to affirm the latter but deny the former.

The above account of human rights in Buddhism has been given entirely within the context of an understanding of human good which has its apex in nirvana-in-this-life. Reference to the transcendent dimension of human good and its ground has been avoided for several reasons. The first is that no reference need be

⁶³ A.iii.208

made to transcendent realities in order to ground human rights. That this is so can be seen from the absence of any reference to such realities in contemporary human rights charters, and the fact that many atheists are vigorous defenders of human rights. Where Buddhism is concerned, the vision of human good set out in the third and fourth noble truths provides the necessary basis for a doctrine of human rights. Human rights turn out in essence to be what justice requires if human good is to be fulfilled. The second reason for avoiding reference to transcendent realities is that my aim has been to suggest a basis for human rights acceptable to classical Buddhism as a whole. Since all schools of Buddhism affirm the third and fourth noble truths and the vision of human good they proclaim, the required common ground for a pan-Buddhist doctrine of human rights is present.

The above should not be read as a denial that there can be a transcendent ground for human rights in Buddhism. Because the transcendent dimension of human good is left obscure in Buddhist teachings, however, the transcendent ground for human rights is also obscure. In terms of the account given here, the transcendent ground for human rights would be post-mortem nirvana, not in the sense of an absolute reality (as suggested by Küng) but as the universalization of human good on a transcendent plane. The twin axes of human good are knowledge (*prajñāa*) and moral concern (*karu.naa*¹), and on the graph defined by these axes can be plotted the soteriological coordinates of any individual. Through participation in these twin categories of good, human nature progressively transcends its limitations and becomes saturated with nirvanic goodness. Eventually, in post-mortem nirvana, this goodness attains a magnitude which can no longer be charted. If a transcendent ground for human rights is desired, this is where it should be sought.

To sum up: it is legitimate to speak of both rights and human rights in Buddhism. Modern doctrines of human rights are in harmony with the moral values of classical Buddhism in that they are an explication of what is “due” under Dharma. The modern idea of human rights has a distinctive cultural origin, but its underlying preoccupation with human good makes it at bottom a moral issue in which Buddhism and other religions have a legitimate stake. The Global Ethic endorses the view that the principles it sets forth on human rights are neither new nor “Western” when it states: “We

affirm that a common set of core values is found in the teachings of the religions, and that these form the basis of a global ethic.”⁶⁴

A final thought. Above I have spoken only of human rights, and in the context of Buddhism this perspective may be unduly narrow in that it seems to preclude the universe of sentient non-human beings from any entitlement to rights. Buddhists may feel, therefore, that it is less prejudicial in discussions of this kind to revert to the older terminology of “natural” rights. Whether or not animals have rights, and whether these are the same rights as human beings, is a matter which requires separate discussion. If human rights flow from human nature, as suggested, it may be that rights of different kinds flow from natures of different kinds. Such would seem to be the understanding of classical Buddhism.

⁶⁴ Küng and Kuschel (eds) (1993:14).

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