

DHAMMIC SOCIALISM

Political Thought of Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu

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ocialism is an idea that arose in reaction to the idea of democracy according to Locke and the liberal capitalist economic thought of Adam Smith. There were three schools of thought that arose as a reaction to political liberalism or democracy and economic liberalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They are: romanticism, socialism, and fascism. Romanticism was a reaction to the rationalism and science that led to the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century, which, instead of making the people happier and more comfortable, pushed the majority of people, who were already poor, into desolation and misery. The rich treated the poor like slaves or animals and destroyed their human dignity. The romantics did not propose a comprehensive solution for improving society, and sometimes merely dreamed of the good societies of the past. However, both doctrines aimed to release humanity from enslavement to material things and escape the troubles caused by material things.

While fascism was also a reaction to democracy, it did not arise in all countries, only in those that had suffered defeat in war and were afflicted with poverty, distress and the dishonor forced upon them by treaties drafted by the victorious parties. In these countries, namely Germany and Italy, previous governments had been incapable of solving the nation's problems. In the people's eyes the parliament was merely a place where people came together to talk but could do nothing, so they turned to charismatic individuals who promised to lead their nations to glory. Mussolini, for example, promised to lead Italy to a glory like that of the Roman Empire, while Hitler wanted to create a third Rhine Empire. Neither the romantics nor the fascists had as much influence as socialism, which has remained the main rival of democracy till the present.

The doctrine of socialism arose in the western world. Thus the word has a specific history and meaning. Its meaning may be deduced from its history and its fundamental thought. The difference between socialism and romanticism is that while socialism, like romanticism, opposed the capitalists, socialism did not oppose but rather valued industrialization,

science and reason. Socialism saw freedom as a good thing, but freedom cannot really arise without equality. The democratic system and capitalism gave so much freedom that they almost ignored equality, leading to disparities and oppression. Disparity arose from an unfair distribution of the fruits of production in which the surplus went to the capitalists.

Socialism also differed from romanticism in that, unlike the romantics, it attempted to propose solutions, methods by which societies could become socialist societies. While socialist thinkers proposed different methods, they were all alike in that they proposed methods of some kind or other. Historically speaking, socialism may be divided into two main groups: socialism before Marx, which Marx himself referred to as “the socialism of dreams,” (Utopian socialism) which I will refer to as Utopian socialism to reduce its disparaging tone, and the socialism of Marx, which he called scientific socialism.

G. D. H. Cole summarized the features of Utopian socialism as follows:

The first feature of Utopian socialism is that it is moral. It is the socialism that proposes the necessary conditions for a good society which enable people to escape from the present kind of society, which is evil. All followers of this kind of socialism hold the present state of society to be bad, and that is why people are bad. The way to give people a good way of life is to create a new system or structure of human relationship.

The second feature is that this kind of socialism holds that the good way of life is a natural way of life. The bad way of life arises from straying from the natural state. In this they were similar to the romantics.

The third feature is that Utopian socialism, while for the most part critical of present society, is nevertheless optimistic in that it believes that human beings will get better; that is, progress will occur, naturally of itself. This is a general characteristic of socialism.

The fourth feature is that almost all followers of this kind of socialism believe that a good life will arise from the advance of human knowledge. Some socialist thinkers explain this progress as intellectual, some say it is technological.

The fifth feature is that almost all followers of this kind of socialism believe that scientific and technological advancement will help to solve the problem of human poverty by increasing production to a level that can provide for the needs of the whole human race.

The sixth feature is that Utopian thinkers believed that people would act more rationally as knowledge grew, that the use of reason in politics would help to quicken the revolution of human relations.

Utopian socialism is considered to be socialism because it believes that the organization of the social structure is a cause for people's good or bad lives and for people being good or evil. It believes that people commit evil more because of an unnatural environment than because of poverty or their being inherently bad. If the environment is properly organized people will behave morally and rationally.

Utopian socialists have different ideas regarding methods. For instance, Robert Owens and St. Simone believed that an education that nurtured reason would help forge a new society. Fourier believed that human desires would lead to behavior that conflicts with society and force society to adjust itself naturally. However, all of these groups believed that people could not be improved through sermons and teachings but through an environment in which good actions were easy to do and bad ones difficult to do. As to the present state of society, which is a bad one, different thinkers have different ideas. Some, for example, feel that special privileges are an important cause for social evils, while others may feel it is competition.<sup>1</sup>

Utopian socialism strives to find a rationale for justice and brotherhood rather than emphasizing the power of the people. Marx tried to show that victory lay more in the power of the working classes than in moral dictums. Marx believed that class privileges, exploitation and fixed social classes were evils to be destroyed. But he believed that this would arise naturally as a result of transformation of the economic system, independent of human intention. This state is a historical fact, or a natural law of social evolution. It is rooted in materialism and has nothing to do with morality. The transformation of society into one without classes, or from evil to good, does not arise from good intentions or from reason, but from the development of the oppressed classes as they rise up against the ruling classes in each age of social development. This consideration of social changes in terms of facts rather than values caused Marx to refer to his thinking as "scientific socialism."

That Marx believed in society undergoing a fixed and inescapable evolution in the course of history caused him to believe that the specific small scale solutions to social problems proposed by the Utopian socialists, such as educating people to be more reasonable and less exploitative, or organizing cooperatives to improve the living of the

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<sup>1</sup>G. D. H. Cole, "What is Socialism," in *Ideologies of Politics* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 81-82.

working classes, were mistaken because they lacked an understanding of the procedure of the entire social stream, and in any case could never be realized because society must evolve according to its own inevitable current. Marx called this misunderstanding of reality an “incorrect conscience,” and so he labeled this kind of socialism “Utopian socialism,” pipe-dream socialism.

These are the history and features of socialism. Be it Utopian or Marxist, the common objective of socialism is to build a society of equality, since the doctrine arose as a reaction to the inequality and exploitation of liberal capitalism. Since they have this common objective, while socialist thinkers may propose different methods for solutions—some, for example, propose reducing the gap between the classes and creating a good standard of living via a welfare state; some propose a system of communes; some propose the state taking on the important tasks of national security and social welfare; some propose the state taking over all economic activities—but regardless of the method used, they all have the same main features: socialism is an economic system which stresses cooperation, planned labor and production and just distribution of wealth, all of which reduce or destroy the economic power of the private sector which is so great in the liberal capitalist system.

While these important characteristics correspond most closely with Marxist capitalism, other kinds of socialism have a tendency to proceed in such a way that the state becomes involved, intervenes, or exerts pressure; the state at least plays a greater role in organizing economic activity than in a liberal capitalist system. Since socialism arose in western civilization, and is an important event, process or stage in western civilization, the word is one with a specific meaning and particular objectives and ideas. It is a politico-economic idea or doctrine, not a general term that can be used as one pleases, and to do so could be misleading. The characteristics of socialism may be so broad that many different kinds of thought can be included within it, but it must be clearly pointed out which feature of society it conforms with and which important features it lacks.

Buddhādāsa’s analysis of socialism, which he referred to as “*Dhammic socialism*,” must also be looked at in this light in order to determine whether it is in fact socialism or not; if so, what kind of socialism it is, and what special features it has. We will decide these issues partly on the basis of his own writings and partly on the basis of support and rejection from others. Within Buddhādāsa’s work, we will be first analyzing the two

words—socialism and *Dhamma*—which go up to make Dhammic socialism, before going on to a practical evaluation.

Buddhadāsa uses the term socialism in a slightly different way from how it is used in the West. His analysis of socialist thought is clearly based on the teachings of the *Aggañña Sutta*, although he does not actually cite it. This he proceeds to analyze with a modern socialist outlook, an outlook on surplus and class exploitation, and then combines socialist thought with absolute monarchy and the righteous king (*dhammarāja*). We will attempt to determine just how viable his system of thought is, and in order to clearly understand it I will cite his own words:

*Socialism is a natural state*

Here he uses the word nature in a sense that includes its Pāli meaning and conforms with the concept held in Buddhism and other religions such as Taoism. Taoism uses the word “*tao*” in many senses. It can mean “nature,” “the source of all things,” “a path or way,” “living according to that way,” and “the destination of the way.” These meanings have a similarity to the idea of God in Christian and Hindu teachings. Buddhadāsa says of the word *Dhamma*:

“*Dhamma*, God, Tao, or whatever, can refer to ‘a way,’ to ‘traveling along the way,’ or to ‘arriving at the destination of the way.’ They are all the same and cannot be separated, and doing so would serve no purpose.” (*Dhammik*. p. 8)<sup>2</sup>

The reason he explains socialism as a natural state is that he sees all things as socialist by nature; i.e., they all exist together within the one system. He uses the phrase “one system” in a very broad sense, including the physical world, such as the stars.

“We study in science about the world and its mechanics, about all of the galaxies within the universe, and they are all a socialist system. The countless stars up in the sky exist in a socialist system, they are all right and well according to the socialist system, and that is how the universe can survive. This tiny solar system of ours, with the sun surrounded by the various planets, including our own earth, exist together in a socialist system. But they are not so crazy as to crash into each other. These days human beings are so crazy they bite each other and clash with each other because

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<sup>2</sup> The word “*Dhammik*” refers to Buddhadāsa’s book, *Dhammic Socialism*, a Thai version, edited with Introduction by Donald K. Swearer (Bangkok: Komol Keemthong Foundation, 2529)—*Editor*.

they adhere to an unrighteous (non-Dhammic) socialism, one that is not right according to the standards of nature, and do not know the truths of nature.” (*Dhammik.* pp. 117–118)

The feature of this natural socialism is, according to Buddhādāsa, the same as animal societies: living together without conflict, not infringing on each other’s rights. He gives as example:

“Look at the birds: we will see that they eat only as much food as their stomachs can hold. They cannot take more than that: they don’t have granaries. Look down at the ants and insects: that is all they can do. Look at the trees: trees imbibe only as much nourishment and water as the trunk can hold, and cannot take in any more than that. Therefore a system in which people cannot encroach on each other’s rights or plunder their possessions is in accordance with nature and occurs naturally, and that is how it has become a society continued to be one, until trees became abundant, animals became abundant, and eventually human beings became abundant in the world. The freedom to hoard was tightly controlled by nature in the form of natural socialism.” (*Dhammik.* pp. 65–66)

*This natural state is composed of two important factors*

Firstly, things existing together; secondly, their existing together is interdependent, there is no conflict or aberration within the system. That means there is balance and there is unity. Buddhādāsa explains it thus:

“Natural truth is the essence of *Dhamma*, or of nature. It is the one thing, the actuality of nature, and that is socialism. There is nothing that can live alone, by itself; all things must depend on each other. Without the land how can a tree stand? Without trees, how can the land exist? How can water exist without trees, without the land?...

“Or one person: he embodies the socialist ideal: there must be many parts and factors working together, inseparably. Those who have studied anatomy or medicine know this well. The eye is connected to the ear, the ear is connected to the nose, and the nose is connected to the mouth. Nothing can exist separately on its own... The large and small organs must all work together and function properly according to the natural truth of the compounded things that go to make up and support the body. Thus the spirit of socialism exists within all people...

“Even among socialists there is killing, because there are many different kinds of socialists. But if it is right according to the natural truth there will only be one kind, so there would be no reason to kill anybody because there would be no point of conflict.” (*Dhammik.* pp. 99–101)



*For society to maintain a natural balance*

*There must be no taking of surpluses*

Surplus is not evil if it is justly distributed, but it is exploitation to store surplus as a personal possession. Everyone wants a surplus, and that is why there is competition and conflict. Buddhādāsa explains:

“Primitive peoples in the earliest times, half-men half-animals or people enough to be called ‘primitive peoples,’ lived according to nature. They automatically lived according to nature’s control, with no surpluses, so there were no social problems. Theirs was an automatic socialism of nature and it was right. They were able to survive for hundreds of thousands of years, or for however many years it was, to become the people of the present day because they lived in a way that was right according to the nature that supported them.

“When did problems begin to arise? They began when human beings began to step out of line. Some began to learn how to amass and were clever enough to produce. They competed with each other to produce and to amass, and grab too many things, more than what was necessary, for themselves. This is where the problem began.” (*Dhammik*, p. 66)

“If people did not take surpluses there would be a lot left over, and the surpluses would fall to others. Then those others would not be deprived. If people grab all the surpluses for their own consumption there will have to be deprivation, and the poor will quickly multiply. If people did not take surplus there would be no poverty. The taking of surplus increases endlessly because of greed and through endless kinds of dirty tricks. In no long time great deprivation arises, and other people become impoverished.” (*Dhammik*, pp. 105–106)

The analysis at this point is clearly the same line of thinking as ordinary socialism: economic problems are the fundamental problems or the source of social problems. That is to say, social classes arise and fall into conflict because some groups of people store away surplus fruits of production as their own in excess. The surplus production does not fall to the people in need. People in need become impoverished and they become adversaries of the group that takes the surplus.

*Socialism must distribute the surplus to those in need*

Buddhādāsa has no objection to surplus production and does not object to economic disparity, but rich people should share with the poor. He says:

“The working classes should not lay a finger on those capitalists who are like the rich Buddhists of the Buddha’s time, but should rather honor them. However, if by capitalists we mean those who appropriate power, influence

and money and whatever else to make themselves richer and richer, this is a totally different thing: capitalists who feed the world and capitalists who grab ... As for rich people other than Buddhist rich people, I do not know, but the rich people spoken of in the Pāli Canon were all this way, especially the rich people who were members of the Buddhist company (*buddhaparisa*).” (*Dhammik*. pp. 79–80)

This kind of society may not be the highest kind of socialism, but it is one in which people can be happy. For the ideal socialist state, Buddhādāsa cites the example of the Saṅgha, a society which consumes and uses only what is necessary and does not store things, so no surpluses fall to anybody. As he says:

“Thus we have an ideal socialist community without even knowing it. We could say it has existed in the administrative system of the Saṅgha from the time of the Buddha down to the present, or that it already exists in the system of Buddhist teaching. If we look at the way the Buddha conducted himself toward worldly beings, we will see that it was the ideal of socialism.” (*Dhammik*. p. 96)

The socialism described here would, Buddhādāsa believed, arise when people had right view. People have to make themselves right in the eyes of the *Dhamma*, to have *Dhamma*, to have goodwill (*mettā*) and kindness to others. This goodwill will arise when people give up their selves. Giving up of the self can arise when people know how to control themselves and not fall into the power of defilements (*kilesa*) such as greed. Thus Buddhādāsa felt that society would change for the better through people having right view, as he states:

“Social welfare should provide that which is most excellent, which is right view, because problems arise from wrong view, wrong understanding of nature or things, not understanding how they really are. Thus problems must be solved with right view, proper understanding. When one knows that one is doing something wrong or bad one corrects it and redirects one’s mind to a course that is right. In this way society would quickly change for the better.” (*Dhammik*. p. 26)

This passage tells us that right view will correct wrong view, but it does not tell us how right view is to be brought about. Buddhādāsa does talk about the righteous ruler, saying that he is looked after and trained, but he does not explain how he is to be looked after or trained in order to bring about the desired results.

While the ideas we have described on Buddhādāsa’s socialism are well-



intentioned, and such a society would indeed be a good one, there are many points that need to be examined concerning his analysis and the feasibility of the system he proposes. These will be presented both according to his own reasoning and in contrast to the socialism that has actually occurred in history. For ease of understanding I will deal with them point by point.

Buddhadāsa claims that socialism already exists within nature, and the state of nature he refers to here is all things being in their place, not encroaching on or conflicting with each other. He cites the solar system, how all the planets exist in unity and do not clash with each other, as an example of a natural condition. But material things exist together as they do not through cooperation but through conflict: i.e., each of them having its own pull on the others. It is a system arising out of inevitable necessity, not out of partiality or cooperation. The existence of things as a unity does not necessarily arise from agreement to be in any system or from any knowledge of each of the unit's duties, but may rather from compulsion.

Moreover, Buddhadāsa compares the ideal of not taking a surplus with animals and plants, citing how birds eat only as much as their stomachs can take, and how trees take water in accordance with the size of their trunks. If we examine these statements closely we will see that while non-surplus may be moderation, nature is not a state in which things do not take surpluses for the reasons he claims, but rather because:

a. Some things in nature cannot take surpluses: it is not that birds do not wish to take a surplus, but rather they do not know how to. Not taking a surplus and not knowing how to take one are different matters.

b. The not taking of surpluses in plants and animals may result from their inability to do so: trees do not have anywhere to store any more water than their trunks can hold; animals that eat fresh flesh but cannot eat rotten flesh cannot store meat because if they did it would be inedible for them.

c. Storing may be dangerous: if weaker animals stored surplus food it may reveal their whereabouts to stronger animals and so prove dangerous.

It cannot be said that there are no examples in nature of taking surpluses, because ants and termites store surplus food. Frogs eat great amounts before their hibernation, and tigers and crocodiles keep carcasses for eating on a later day if they cannot eat them all at once. Looking at these examples, we see that the non-taking of surpluses is not a natural condition, and taking surpluses does arise in nature.

Regarding plants and animals, Buddhadāsa claims that any given thing exists dependent on other things, but to say "dependent on" in nature does

not mean “cooperation,” but rather “destruction.” Plants destroy the earth in order to grow; animals destroy plants in order to grow; and some kinds of animals destroy other animals as food for their survival. And other animals have a population not too big. That people exploit or destroy each other is their nature. In the *Aggañña Sutta* people are portrayed as degenerating even though they were once good. Why is that, if not because defilements or badness exist within them? Thus Buddhādāsa’s comparison with nature is one-sided, and holds less truth than the opposite perspective. Cooperation is a characteristic of rational beings more than a characteristic of lower forms of nature such as plants or animals.

Buddhādāsa believes in human goodness. He believes that if people could be taught to have right view and restrain themselves from falling into the power of defilements they would have goodwill, and even if surpluses arose they would divide them. Some Utopian socialists believed in this way. If people were easy to teach the majority would be good and those with wrong view would be the minority. For example, in the Saṅgha society, which is a society of good people, the kinds of socialism that propose revolution or are full of class hatred would not arise. If such a society really could be made to arise that would be well and good, but religions have long taught humanity, and still such a society has not arisen. On the contrary, what has arisen and been with us down to the present day are aggression, race and class division, and exploitation. Buddhādāsa cites the rich men of the Buddha’s time as examples, but why has the number of such rich people not increased over the ages? This indicates that we cannot hope to attain socialism voluntarily, and this is why socialist thinkers have devised systems to enforce people to follow the socialist way rather than teaching them the ideals of socialism. We have no proof that the Buddhist rich of the Buddha’s time were the norm for all rich people or whether the rich people mentioned in the *Tipitaka* were rather the exceptions.

Moreover, modern socialists do not want a socialism that waits on other people’s kindness. They believe that the distribution of surplus is the duty of the state, and the receiving of a share of the surplus is people’s right as citizens sharing in the state’s production. No one has the duty to be kind and no one wants to be indebted to another’s kindness. Gains acquired are one’s proper right. They belong to one, and are not something for others to give. On this point we can see that present day socialism differs fundamentally from Buddhādāsa’s socialism.

Socialism, romanticism and spiritualism in general hold rising above enslavement to material things as an objective, but socialism does not say that material things are evils that obstruct freedom or bring oppression upon humanity. Material things may indeed bring oppression on humanity, but that is because a wrong economic system opens the way for certain groups to take advantage of others and empowers them to oppress them. Deprived people value material things because they lack them. People who are free have no need to demand freedom; it is people who lack freedom who want freedom. In the same way people who have enough material things feel no need for them. For those who lack them, material things are objects of desire. Thus, poor people are forced to become tools for producing material goods for their own survival. That is, they become enslaved by the material things they produce: if they do not produce they cannot survive. Once they have produced these goods they cannot possess them. This may be referred to as "having material things as master." The solution to this problem cannot be obtained by merely teaching capitalists to share more of the fruits of production, but by redressing the entire economic system. Buddhādāsa may not agree with this line of thinking because it is one that runs a great risk of violence.

There are many kinds of socialists, but it is possible to ascertain certain general principles that all kinds of socialism can accept. Socialism is a word that arose within a Western historical context. If Buddhādāsa wants to use this word without any connection whatsoever to the socialism that actually exists, then his use of the word has no use intellectually. If his definition agrees in part with actual socialism, there still remains the problem of whether or not the part that is not in agreement is so important that it renders his socialism so defective as to be unworthy of the name socialism, and why he did not rather use another more suitable term, such as "righteous monarchy" (*dhammarāja*), which would greatly reduce the confusion.

At the beginning I discussed socialism as it is generally known. Here I will present the principles of socialism to examine how far the ideas proposed by Buddhādāsa accord with them. The reason we must use socialist thinking to examine Buddhādāsa's thinking is because this word and these principles arose before Buddhādāsa proposed his ideas about socialism.

Buddhādāsa talks of "not taking a surplus," which implies being in a position to take a surplus but not taking it. Marxist socialism does not

believe that such a thing can be brought about in society. That is why they create a social system by which the non-taking of surpluses is enforced, in which the state determines production and distributes the fruits of production. But there are some groups of socialists, such as the Utopian socialists and the Fabian socialists, who believe in human rationality, that if human beings are educated and made more rational, human society will change into a more socialist society. They believe in a gradual transformation, a peaceful transformation. Buddhādāsa's way may fall into this group, but what he must clearly indicate, like other socialist thinkers, is by what method he proposes the solution. Some socialists, for example, propose a system of communes, and some propose a system of welfare. Buddhādāsa simply cites the example of alms given by the rich, meaning that the state does not perform any economic organization. The giving of alms has no sure guarantees, and those who receive the alms have virtually played no part in the production of what they receive. They are receiving a share of other people's production given as alms, not a share of what has been produced by their own sweat. This differs from the socialist view and socialists would find this kind of idea unacceptable because the production system still contains exploitation, and surpluses are still falling to the rich. Some kinds of socialists may accept disparities in economic status, but their system of distribution of the fruits of production is not voluntary, but organized by the state through high taxes, distributed to the people as state welfare: the people receive it from the state as its citizens, not as charity from any particular person.

Buddhādāsa's socialism places its hopes so much in a king who upholds the ten qualities of a righteous monarch (*dasabidharājadhamma*) that it fails to recognize the necessity of having a system, believing that such a king will be able to control society as he wishes. It is the system of a good ruler who builds a good system, and everyone can benefit from it. However, being a good person and having the ability to create an efficient system are two different things. We cannot believe that the qualities of goodness, ability, acumen, knowledge and possession of accurate and complete information can be found in any one person, and even if they could it is still doubtful how such a person could be created, who would create him if the creator did not have such qualities himself, who would check to see that he really did fulfill those requirements, what system or standards would be used to create him, and what system or standards would be used to screen him. Socialism does not usually put its trust in individuals. While it believes in human goodness, it also believes that

people must be gradually developed. What is more urgent is the building of a better system to redress and replace the old one. Placing the aim in an ideal, and placing one's hopes on the government of an ideal person, without any method for realizing the objective and for obtaining such an ideal person, is a long way from practicality, and ventures on the impracticable. Teaching on its own is not an efficient enough way to bring about these results.

One thing that socialism, especially Marxist socialism, believes in is that the values people accept and follow in society arise from social determination, and how society determines these values depends on the production process in use at the time. For example, in a society with a capitalist economy competition is a good thing and making a profit is right, professions involving technological production are extolled, and wealth is the highest aspiration. Freedom in which the state has minimal intervention is the right kind of freedom. In a society in which production is in the hands of a monarchy and religion, there is adherence to abstract values, priority given to mental happiness rather than physical happiness, extolling of individuals on account of abstract values or religious beliefs, as in exalting the *brahmin* and warrior castes, because education and administrative power in organizing society lies in these people's hands. Thus they believe and teach others to believe as they do. Society is the determiner of social values. People as members of society hold to the values society determines for them. Thus a change in values will not arise through teaching, but by making the social system one that supports those values. But we can see that Buddhādāsa does not speak of, or may not believe, this. It seems he believes that righteousness (*Dhamma*) and humane-ness exist naturally. Human beings do not create the *Dhamma* and neither does society. When people act in contravention of the *Dhamma* they naturally experience distress. When human beings realize the *Dhamma* they live at ease and at peace. If he believes this, his thinking contradicts the major principles of socialism. He may call his thinking socialist, but people will easily misunderstand his teaching because they will be accustomed to the original meaning of socialism.

One point on which it may be said that Buddhādāsa and socialism agree is the objective of society, which is the return of human dignity. That is, freeing people from being defined and forced by material things into seeking only their consumption with no chance of doing anything else, and from being forced to live simply to produce material things and have their ways of life determined by activities of production. Instead activities of




production become simply a way for enabling people to live well, with a reasonable standard of living, with time left over to pursue other activities that they are equipped for, such as thinking, doing good actions, and admiring things of beauty such as the arts.

I use the word “agree” because the objective to be attained once human beings are freed of their enslavement to material things, being abstract, is conceived differently by different schools of thought. Thus I have not used the phrase “the same as.”

We have seen that Buddhādāsa talks of socialism with an emphasis on the word “*Dhammic*,” meaning government by *Dhamma*. A human being who embodies *Dhamma* is thus one of the essential factors in Buddhādāsa’s political thought, and this is what we will consider in the next section.

## II

he concept of the *dhammarāja* is a product of Buddhist culture. Thai people have adopted that culture, so the *dhammarāja* is a concept that Thai people have long been familiar with. However not many people have stopped to consider whether the *dhammarāja* is compatible or conflicts with our present political system and whether the term can be used in the present time. It is simply accepted that a ruler who is a *dhammarāja* is a good ruler and is compatible with any system. Buddhādāsa was the first to point out that a *dhammarāja* must be compatible with both socialism and absolute monarchy, and this led to the special kind of socialism he calls “Dhammic” socialism. Whether or not this kind of socialism can actually exist, discussing it can at least connect an ancient political term with a modern one to create a new thought and ideal. While it cannot be put into practice now, if it is a good ideal we may be able to find a way to put it into practice in the future, like other forms of government that have arisen in the course of history. Thus, in order to understand the word *dhammarāja* clearly we should first examine its meaning. Sangkhom Sriraj writes this on the *dhammarāja*:

“*Dhammarāja* is glossed in four ways. The first is (he is called *dhammarāja*) because he conducts himself righteously (with *Dhamma*). The second is: because worldly beings, including *devas* and humans, acknowledge and exalt him righteously, not unrighteously. The third is: because he is glorious in righteousness. The fourth is: because he governs his subjects righteously... The word *dhammarāja* is a name of the Buddha, an honorific



name for kings, and a title of the Lord of Death. It is one of the descriptive titles (*nemittakanāma*) of the Buddha. Wherever this word is used in the Canon, it refers to the Buddha. For example, in the *Bojjhaṅga Paritta* it is said *ekadā dhammarājāpi gelaññenūbhipiḷito*, meaning “One time the Buddha was seriously ill.” In the introductory verses of the *Dhammacakkavattana Sutta* it is said *desitaṃ dhammarājena sammāsambodhi-kittanaṃ*: “The Buddha declared his full, perfect enlightenment (*sammāsambodhiñāṇa*) in this discourse.” It is used in the same sense in other parts of the Canon. It is used as an honorific name for kings who rule the land righteously, and whose conduct is known to their subjects at large, so that the people unanimously confer on him the title *Dhammarāja*, meaning “the Lord embodying righteousness.” ... It is used in reference to the Lord of Death in that he conducts himself as a righteous king, constant in his justice: whoever makes bad or good *kamma*, he considers in accordance with their *kamma*. In conclusion, *dhammarāja* means “Lord embodying righteousness.”<sup>3</sup>

The word *dhammarāja* in reference to a king refers to *Dhamma* as an attribute of the king’s conduct, both as a person and as the ruler of the land, but does not go into specific details. Nowadays it tends to be defined as a king who possesses the *dasabidharājadhamma* (ten kingly dhamma); the *dasabidharājadhamma* are taken as the foundation, since *rājadhamma* translates as “the *dhamma* of a king.” Buddhādāsa defines the term in this way, but if we consider it in terms of the Buddha’s teachings appearing in the *Tipitaka*, we find that there are other teachings, such as the *cakkavattivatta* (duties of a universal emperor). The *cakkavattivatta* is a major teaching which has broader scope because it also encompasses the economy and the society. The teachings on the *dasabidharājadhamma* appear briefly in the *Mahāhamsa Jātaka* as follows:

“See here, Lord of the Swans. I see clearly my long remaining life and am established in the *dasabidharājadhamma*, thus I am not afraid of the next world. Seeing these skillful qualities within me, i.e., generosity, morality, charity, honesty, humility, effort, non-anger, non-harm, patience, and non-fury, great rapture and pleasure arise in me.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Sangkhom Sriraj, “Dhammarāja.” *Thai Encyclopedia of the Royal Institute*, Vol. 14 (Bangkok: Royal Institute, 2521), pp. 9134-9135.

<sup>4</sup> Suttanta Piṭaka, Khuddhaka Nikāya, 28/240. (The *Tipitaka* used in this article is the *Syāmratta* Version. The first number refers to the volume, the second number refers to the passage—*Editor*.)

• This passage speaks of the blessings (*ānisaṃsa*) of the *dasabidharājadhamma* as merely the non-arising of illness in the present moment, the subjects not committing crimes or thinking badly of the king, the royal consort being well behaved, and the king's children being of pleasant appearance. Moreover those qualities cause the king to govern without exploiting the people, to be without anger, to be just, to deport himself evenly, in a way that befits his position, to be reverent to wise persons (*sappurisa*), to not associate with foolish persons (*asappurisa*) and to not be deluded by objects that are conducive to delusion. Thus the righteous monarch need not fear meeting with suffering in the next world. In discussing the blessings and conduct that result from the *dasabidharājadhamma*, the Buddha does not lay stress on politics or government and economics as much as he did in some other *suttas*, such as the *Cakkavatti Sutta* or the *Kūṭadanta Sutta*, and he does not give them as much importance as we claim for them in the present day. That people nowadays stress the *dasabidharājadhamma* more than other teachings may cause us to misunderstand the Buddha's thoughts in regard to politics given in other places, because since he only discussed the subject rarely, interpreters of his teachings may read too much into his words to fit them into their own ideas.

The idea of the righteous king (*dhammarāja*) has existed in Thai history from the Sukhothai period, as is shown by the appearance of the kings entitled *Dhammarāja* and *Mahādhammarāja*. King Lithai, for example, was known as *Mahādhammarāja* I. Prince Damrong Rachanubhap, a Thai famous classical historian, explains that the use of the term *dhammarāja*, one of the Buddha's epithets, to refer to a king probably first arose in Sri Lanka, the term being conferred on kings who really did have thorough knowledge of the *Dhamma-Vinaya*. Later on the term was used less strictly to refer to kings who did not have much knowledge about the *Dhamma-Vinaya* but were strong in faith and support of the religion. In later times, when Lankan monks entered Thailand during the Sukhothai period, they may have used the term to refer to Thai kings, and so the term may have been in use since the time of King Ramkhamhaeng. Later kings, not wishing to feel inferior in virtue to the former kings, used the term *Mahādhammarāja* until it became the custom in the Sukhothai period. In terms of actual knowledge of the *Dhamma-Vinaya*, King Lithai was the king most deserving of the name *Mahādhammarāja*. *Dhammarāja* was not the only epithet of the Buddha used for kings. Others were *sanphet* (*sabbaññū*,

omniscient one), *lokanātha* (refuge of the world), and *songtham* (embodiment of *Dhamma*). Even kings' sons were given such names as *no phraphuttachao*, and *no phutthānkura* ("Buddha-sprout"), implying that the king himself is a Buddha or a *bodhisatta*, one who will in a future birth become a Buddha.<sup>5</sup>

When we examine the words *dhammarāja* and *dasabidharājadhamma*, we find that the emphasis is on knowledge of the *Dhamma*, embodying the *Dhamma* and ruling with *Dhamma*. But there is another meaning for which the Emperor Aśoka is usually cited as an example, and that is spreading the *Dhamma* to other lands, giving up the expansion of might via military means and expanding the might of the *Dhamma* just as the Buddha himself "turned the wheel of Dhamma." This idea is not found in the *dasabidharājadhamma* but in the teachings on the qualities of a true universal emperor (*cakkavatti*).

It can be seen that regardless of whether we speak of the *dhammarāja* from the *dasabidharājadhamma* or from another teaching, there is no modern political thought to be found. Trying to explain modern political thought with such teachings may be inadequate in terms of modern political thought, or may cause people to think that they are matters of two different cultures or different frames of reference. This kind of thing has arisen with the work of Buddhādāsa. The way to understand the problem is to consider it in terms of the way things are. Rather than expecting the Buddha to have a teaching for every time and every place, we should rather expect merely to be able to adapt his teachings to our use or use them as guidelines in certain cases. Events nowadays are not the same as those of the Buddha's time and there was no necessity for the Buddha to give teachings for this time and age to people of his own time.

Dhammic socialism is socialism containing *Dhamma*. The *Dhamma* referred to here is held by Buddhādāsa to be a virtue of the ruler or king, which he says is a king who embodies the *dasabidharājadhamma*. This kind of king is generally called a *dhammarāja*. Buddhādāsa says of the *dhammarāja* endowed with the *dasabidharājadhamma*:

"A king who has the *dasabidharājadhamma* is full-blown socialism in the form of a despot. He gets things done quickly. An example is Emperor Aśoka, or another king who existed in Thai history but in whom no one shows much interest, King Ramkhamhaeng. Look at them—were they

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<sup>5</sup> Sangkhom Sriraj, p. 9136.

despots or not? Were they socialists or not? If we look carefully we will see that they were a kind of socialists we never dreamed of, and they governed as parents govern their children. This is something we should bring back. Do not go bragging about or being taken in by the freedom of the 'me and mine' democracy." (*Dhammik*. p. 88)

A king who has the *dasabidharājadhamma* is both a socialist and a despot. He is a socialist because he acts for others—taking on the responsibility of distributing surplus and eliminating exploitation. He is a despot because he acts absolutely and immediately to produce quick results.

"Westerners may not know of this kind of monarchy. It is not found in their political text books. What is it that we refer to as a king endowed with the *dasabidharājadhamma*? Should we abolish it? And why do we have new systems that abolish the king or absolute monarch? What is the difference in meaning? If the king is a despot, a tyrant, or an absolute monarch, then it is fitting to abolish him, that is true, but why should we abolish a monarchical system that contains the *dasabidharājadhamma*, which is the active agent of socialism? (*Dhammik*. p. 72)

It seems as if Buddhādāsa accepts absolute monarchy. I say "seems" because elsewhere he talks of the "first monarch" arising from the people's plebiscite. Thus it is not clear whether he favors the hereditary absolute monarchy or an elected monarch. What is sure is that he agrees with absolute monarchy, under the provision that the king must be endowed with the *dasabidharājadhamma*. This fits in with his thoughts on despotism:

"The idea of the constitutional monarchy trying to uphold the *dasabidharājadhamma* explained above cannot be found in texts the Westerners give us to study. Go and figure it out for yourselves: maybe a system in which there is a good "seed," a sovereign class, who is constantly tended and strengthened and seen to be established in the *dasabidharājadhamma* could be a kind of socialism that helps the whole world. A king endowed with the *dasabidharājadhamma* will be every inch a socialist. He should be preserved in the world. If there is no such person then simply to have a revolution or change the one person is enough." (*Dhammik*. pp. 87–88)

According to this passage, Buddhādāsa suggests that the ruler is to be created. The beginning of the passage seems to recommend creating a group of people, the sovereign class, to be looked after and trained in the

*dasabidharājadhamma*, but it does not explain who is going to do the looking after and how they are going to do it. If the king has absolute power, who or what power can control or supervise him? And suppose that the candidate for kingship, who has been duly trained, is a group of people, what methods are there for choosing which of them is to be the king: who has the proper qualities to choose the king—the previous king or someone else?

The last part of the passage seems to indicate that these kings are created one at a time, because we are told that whenever the king is found to be lacking in the *dasabidharājadhamma*, all that needs to be done is change that one person. If these two passages are considered in light of the facts, we conclude that if it were possible to create a *dhammarāja*, then once a *dhammarāja*, such as Aśoka or King Lithai, passes away, then all the ascendants to the throne that followed would be trained to be *dhammarāja*. No such efficient system of training has yet actually existed. As for the point that whenever a king lacks the *dasabidharājadhamma* we need only change the one person, this is not true, because a tyrant has his retinue and is never easy to overthrow.

Buddhadāsa's ideas on the ruler or *dhammarāja* contain a number of other problematic points, as follows:

1. Buddhadāsa speaks only of the good moral qualities of the ruler, but modern rulership must also have acumen, broad knowledge, understanding of various social systems and also the human mind. These he does not mention. It may be that he had these qualities in mind as well, but the *dasabidharājadhamma* are the most important, but if that is the case, such a ruler would be extremely hard to find. Without a specific method for creating him there can be no hope of ever obtaining such a ruler.

2. Buddhadāsa does not tell us how such a ruler is to arise or what methods there are for choosing him. While he does say to the effect that his ruler is "one with good blood," a sovereign class raised to ever better levels and trained in the *dasabidharājadhamma*, it seems that he takes the existence of this group for granted. Where is this group or sovereign class to come from? If such a group does not already exist, and it must be created, who is going to create it, and how? It is not enough to say "raised" and "cared for" because even in the present day, among people who have good discipline and order, like the Saṅgha, we still cannot efficiently create such people: there are still many monks who transgress the

discipline. Thus, an efficient method for controlling and supervising is essential.

This kind of thinking is not new. Plato and many Western philosophers thought of creating especially good people to be the leaders, and most of them proposed the method of providing a special education for those people and methods for choosing who was to receive such a special education, but none of them could guarantee obtaining people with the desired qualities because problems in the philosophy of education are still many.

If we were to use the method of selection outlined in the *Aggañña Sutta* for obtaining our ruler, we must specify our method. How are we going to obtain good people? Nowadays we have modern methods for selection, but still bad people are elected, sometimes in great numbers, as we have so often seen. And if we were to claim that this is because present day society is not good, it must be countered that if we had to wait for society to be good before we could find a good ruler, then what good would the ruler be, since society was already good? And if it is not possible to find a good ruler in a bad society, it is useless to propose finding a good ruler, because it cannot be done.

3. According to Buddhādāsa's examples, the *dhammarāja* is not good just because he is a king, because there are many other kings who are not *dhammarāja*. Moreover, the status of *dhammarāja* obtained by kings does not always result from the same methods, either from education or from continuation of the lineage. Emperor Aśoka, for example, turned to supporting Buddhism after becoming disheartened (*saṃveja*) over killing so many people in his campaigns. It is not known for what reason King Lithai took an interest in Buddhism, but it is known that he had faith in the teaching and studied it until he was expert in it, and built temples and invited learned monks from Sri Lanka to disseminate their knowledge in Thailand. If it were possible to create kings like King Lithai then we should have had one in every reign, or at least in the majority, but it does not seem that later kings were like King Lithai. Kings who had done much warring did all not have changes of heart like Emperor Aśoka. It may almost be said that the *dhammarāja* that arose in history were special cases, the exceptions, and did not arise from anybody's creation or any system. We may accept that the objective of society is goodness and justice, and we may be able to accept, as Buddhādāsa does, that the method for arriving at this objective is having a ruler who possesses the



*dasabidharājadhamma*, but without a method for obtaining this just ruler, that good objective cannot be made a reality. This problem demands an answer, not just a general or unclear statement.

4. Government cannot proceed smoothly with only one ruler. There must be administrators on different levels. While having a good ruler on the highest level may help to make the administrators on the lower levels function better, this is not a sure thing. At present we sometimes have a good and moral prime minister but the permanent government officials on lower levels do not follow his example. If we do not yet have any method for efficiently creating one good ruler, it is even more unlikely that we will be able to build many good rulers at once. However, Buddhadāsa does not address this question. We must accept that a good example may not necessarily be followed: the Buddha was a good example, but he had to lay down a great number of *Vinaya* rules because there were so many disciples (*sāvaka*) who did not follow his example.

5. Even with a good and moral ruler there must be some system of government. If socialism is not taking surplus, there must be some mechanism for seeing that this is done. Buddhadāsa gives as example the donations of the wealthy in the time of the Buddha, but those were voluntary actions. There were some who did not do so. In modern society, where there is very little distribution of surplus, or not as much as Buddhadāsa recommends, what mechanisms are there for bringing about the distribution of surpluses? This is a very important point which is dealt with by all kinds of socialism, but Buddhadāsa has nothing to propose on it. How can he bring about the socialism he wants, and how absolute must the despot's rule be to bring it about?

6. The discussion so far has taken it as given that a ruler endowed with the *dasabidharājadhamma* can be found. But how do we govern if such a ruler cannot be found? Or must we allow a bad ruler to set up a despotic rule without any system controlling him? The various systems of government have arisen entirely from other systems of government which contained irredeemable flaws. An absolute monarchy, for example, with a righteous ruler is very difficult to find. It holds the defect of rulers who lack ability or are even tyrannical, which is a danger to the people. In a free democracy, which gives great freedom to the people, people use their freedom to take advantage of others. Then there is the socialist system to address these problems, but socialism again has its problems, because it depends so much on the power of the state to solve economic problems

that it becomes authoritarian. We must accept that at the present time there is no perfect system. We have a democratic government not because this system gets things done best, but because it is the system with the least risk. It does not, for instance, run the risk of having only one ruler, of putting all power in one place, and allows opposition to authority. It does not take the risk of allowing a ruler to rule permanently but reviews his work at regular intervals, and if it is not good it changes the ruler. In this system people have maximum opportunity to participate in government: to participate in the making of laws and to have a chance to address political flaws. As long as we cannot find a righteous king (*dhammarāja*), we can still at least have a government in which the rulers, while not the best there is, cannot be tyrants. If the absolute monarchy was capable of finding a righteous and perfectly capable king, then we would not have to make do with an inferior system of government.

7. Present day governments, be they democratic or socialist, are not dependent only on the people who do the governing, but also on the forms or procedures they use, as in organization of property rights, the economic system, and the legal system. The modern political system gives broad principles for these things so that the various systems within the state will be compatible with each other and abide by its political ideas. The absolute monarchy gives no importance to these matters, because everything is dependent on the king. Even so, in actual practice there is a system. Buddhādāsa says generally that it is socialism, but the socialism he talks of has no clear form or mechanism. In actual fact, liberal democracies differ from place to place. Socialism, too, has many forms and is implemented in different ways. Democracy in itself provides almost no answer at all. Some of the qualities of a righteous monarchy, such as generosity (*dāna*), require the collection of taxes. If much is given, taxes have to be heavy. If there are rich and poor people, then the rich will have to be taxed heavily in order to distribute to the poor. If the system is one in which people are of equal or similar economic standing, then it is not necessary to give *dāna*. In real socialism it is the duty of the state to see that people are of equal economic status, and charity from others is seen as dishonoring the human dignity of the poor. A system of charity is one that presupposes economic disparity, which according to socialism is a sign of an exploitative society. If we wish to show the righteous monarchy as a form of socialism we must show a system or a method for getting rid of exploitation. Then, if the king has no surplus, what is he going to distribute as charity? If he takes taxes to distribute it cannot be called charity (*dāna*) because taxes are not the

king's money. Thus, Buddhadāsa has not yet clearly answered just how the righteous king is to be found, and how he is going to rule.

### III



he idea that the best person should be the ruler seems to be generally accepted. Thus in political systems everywhere there will always be an attempt to establish a ruler's virtue or suitability and his right to rule. For example, Plato claimed a person's virtues obtained through training as the deciding factor for whether or not that person was entitled to be king. The *Aggañña Sutta* describes good characteristics, acumen and ability to adjudicate disputes to the people's satisfaction as the bases for the arising of the first king, indicating that the king was created by people's appointment. The Hindus held the divinity that was part of the king's being as justification for giving him a higher status than ordinary people. Ancient Egyptians believed that the Pharaohs were gods and so had a right to rule human beings. We can see that some of these political principles for sovereignty claimed a higher status, either the status of a divinity or the possession of divine authority. In these cases sovereign power does not belong to the people. In other systems the king is appointed by the people, in which case the source of sovereign power is the people as a whole. Then there are minor variations to be found in profusion in the political texts of the Western and Eastern worlds. They invariably show the justice of the ruler's moral right to rule or a right based on the relationship between the sovereign power and the status of the ruler.

While Buddhadāsa does not say explicitly where he gets the basis for his ideas, and makes his statements as if they were universally accepted truths, they more likely came from the *Aggañña Sutta* than anywhere else. He briefly says in this regard:

"However, it should be known that socialism has already arisen in the past, as the first king to arise did so as a result of the efforts of all the people, who could no longer endure the natural liberalism of that time. This is not a story but something that occurred tens of thousands of years ago, at a time we know nothing of. However, rationally speaking we can see its plausibility. That human beings survive as human beings is the socialist intention. These words probably do not exist in modern political texts, or if they do exist, it is in covert form." (*Dhammik*, p. 71)

Such statements show us that Buddhadāsa believed in the theory of the natural arising of the state, but unlike Plato he did not develop that theory

into a system for creating a righteous ruler through a process of education. Instead he claimed the source of sovereign power to be the collective agreement of the people, following the *Aggañña Sutta*, which has some similarities to Hobbes' theory of the social contract. While there are differences, in general these theories hold that sovereign power belongs to the people. Even so, to cite this theory as justification one must show clearly how the transference of power is to be done and how the revoking of power is to be achieved—what mechanisms are there for ensuring that power is exercised properly?—because the system of election cited in the *Aggañña Sutta* still has many ambiguities, such as:

1. Judging from the *Aggañña Sutta* and the writings of Buddhādāsa, there seems to be a belief that election will produce a good person to be king, but if we pose the counter-question—"Does election always choose good people?"—the fact remains that many times those elected by the people are not good. Even in small societies, such as villages and districts, the representatives chosen by the people and those who are righteous are not necessarily one and the same, and being elected is no guarantee of a person's virtue. Buddhādāsa attacks liberal democracy but in his fundamental belief that whoever is chosen by the people is a good person or is worthy to rule he is thinking no differently from the liberal democrats, except that according to his idea the method of election will only be used once, and thereafter will be replaced by other methods. However he does not clearly explain this point.

2. Considering the conference of sovereign power by the people, in the *Aggañña Sutta* it is a total and absolute bestowal. Western philosophers such as Hobbes are in agreement with this kind of conference of power, although it need not necessarily be given all to one person. Other philosophers, such as Locke, feel that power should be divided so that a balance is struck. A lot of arguments have been presented in political philosophy on the division or non-division of power, but the important argument is not efficacy of operation, without any consideration of the dangers of despotism.

3. The ancient society cited in the *Aggañña Sutta* has no factual historical basis, but this presents no problem as we can consider it in terms of a logical theory. However, even in the *Tipiṭaka*, as for example the *Cakkavatti Sutta*,<sup>6</sup> the Buddha accepts the hereditary emperor. The emperors of ancient India were usually followers of Brahmanism. They

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<sup>6</sup> Suttanta Piṭaka, 11/35.

were *devarāja* (divine kings) rather than *dhammarāja* (righteous kings). Regardless, however, of what kind of king they were, they were very different from elected kings. If, on the other hand, we were to accept the idea of the first elected king passing power on to his descendants, this would be an acceptance of the idea of the ruling caste of Brahmanism, which is in turn accepting the idea of class privilege regardless of personal ability, and closing off the opportunity to rule for capable people from other classes. We must understand that there are good fathers who beget bad sons, and clever fathers who beget foolish sons: a father who is a righteous king may have a son who is not. Buddhādāsa calls Emperor Aśoka a *dhammarāja*, but none of Aśoka's sons or relatives seem to have continued on as *dhammarāja* after him. Buddhādāsa does not explain how the *dhammarāja* following the first is to be obtained or how the following kings are to obtain their sovereign power.

4. Suppose a *dhammarāja* cannot be found, or the person found is bad or a mixture of bad and good, and not really a *dhammarāja*: do the people have the right to revoke the sovereign power? What methods are there for them to do so? How to decide when it is time to revoke that power; how bad does the king have to be? Buddhādāsa does not explain these points. Perhaps he did not think that such situations could arise.

5. What is the position of the people within the state? Do they participate in governing, do they contribute their ideas? Or, once they have conferred the sovereign power, are their honor and status reduced to that of domestic animals of the king? If that is the case such a system of government is not acceptable, because regardless of whether the owner is good or bad, animals are animals just the same.

One of the important components of a government is law. A good government must have clear and just laws, and must have a rational backing for the justice of its laws. For example, in democratic countries legal power comes from the people, who are the owners of the sovereign power, and the people participate in the making of laws for the control of their own conduct. That is, the people govern themselves. Thus the laws made by the legislative body are just laws. All political philosophies speak of laws. Even the absolute monarchies of ancient India or Europe of the Middle Ages had to clearly show the source of their laws and show that the laws they issued were compatible with their source, the religious texts which were the words of the gods. No developed system of government will be without a legal system. If Buddhādāsa claims the *Dhamma* as the



source of the government's laws, he must show what these just laws, issued by the *dhammarāja*, are, because if the *Dhamma* possessed by all *dhammarāja* is the same, then all *dhammarāja* must have the same central laws, even if they do differ in minor details. Buddhādāsa does not address the subject of laws, but goes on to talk of punishment. Even so, the punishment he speaks of is not in part of a government's legal process, which must have clear standards for efficient practice. Under the heading of despotism he cites the characteristics of a *dhammarāja*'s exercise of power. The method of punishment proposed by Buddhādāsa is that known as *brahmadāṇḍa*, or "overturning the bowl" (an agreement to have no commerce with), which is a method that, while viable in the Saṅgha, cannot be used with a government. This is for the following reasons:

1. *Brahmadāṇḍa* works through giving social merits and demerits (social sanctions). This method can only be effective in a small community, and once the community has grown it loses its efficacy. While it can serve as a kind of law, once the society has grown the use of laws is more effective. Thus from ancient times states that have developed beyond the tribal level have used laws. Social sanctions can only be used within lesser institutions that exist within the state.

2. Buddhādāsa cites the Buddha, who used this method with the Saṅgha, as an example, but the Saṅgha society and a national government are very different. The Buddha and the Christian Church during the Middle Ages may have been able to effectively use this method because they had the factor of faith. Buddhists have faith in the Buddha. Whoever does wrong and incurs a *brahmadāṇḍa* can no longer live in the Buddha's community, although he could go to live in a Hindu community or a one of another faith. In the Middle Ages people deemed by the Church to be of wrong view would be excommunicated (*pabbājanīyakamma*), which meant they had lost their chance of meeting God and were doomed to certain damnation in hell. People in those days believed in God and in heaven and hell, and so they had to conform to the power of the Church. Modern governments are not so endowed with faith. Even were there to be a *dhammarāja*, the faith of the people would not be as great as the faith the people of ancient India had in the Buddha.

3. The Saṅgha community during the Buddha's time was not so large, so *brahmadāṇḍa* was effective, but these days it is not so sure that a *brahmadāṇḍa* imposed on a monk would be acknowledged by the Saṅgha throughout the country. It might even lead to a schism. Even shortly after



the Buddha's death the Saṅgha found a difference of opinion and could not impose a *brahmadāṇḍa* and were forced to split into two sects, the Mahā-saṅghikas and the Sthavīras. For the same reason, *brahmadāṇḍa* would not be useful with today's society because bad people may have such large supporting groups that the non-association of others would not trouble them.

4. Different offenses deserve different punishments. *Brahmadāṇḍa* alone is not an appropriate and just punishment for different offenses. The *Vinaya* lays down different grades of severity for different offenses, which may be sufficient for the administration of the Saṅgha, but for a government the punishments need to be defined in more detail. Nowadays this has become such a detailed subject that it requires the separate science of criminology.

5. Theories on the giving of punishment are many. Buddhādāsa does not explain what method he has or what principles his system of punishment follows, or how they fit in with his system of government. He only talks about the subject briefly, which is not enough and adds nothing new to what is already being done. Without clarity on these points, the use of a despotic system is extremely dangerous.

Buddhadāsa proposes despotism to implement political power. He explains his interpretation of the word despot as "despotic in method," giving the word despot two senses:

"I would like to give the word "despot" two meanings. As a principle or political ideal, despotism is useless, but as simply a method of practice or of implementation, it has its uses. That is, it can get things done faster than if the people were totally socialist or democratic. If a certain problem seems to be very drawn out, we hand it to the despot, and in this regard despotic democracy, or people's despotism, is the better system." (*Dhammik*, p. 60)

The word despot explained by Buddhādāsa here, while divided into two distinct meanings, is nevertheless vague. The condition he lays down is "the people being totally socialist or democratic," which would seem to be a "Dhammic socialism,:" in which the people have equality because surplus is distributed. Elsewhere he states "once a ruler is righteous he can be despotic." This has been explained elsewhere under another heading. Here I will discuss whether despotism in the sense of "a method of practice," is in fact as good a thing as Buddhādāsa says it is. Good practice must have a good system, and whoever uses the system must also be good; i.e., he must not use the system for purposes other than for what

that it was intended. Despotism without a system may lead to problems for the leader: he may give orders that are carried out wrongly, not fully or in excess. The example given by Buddhādāsa clearly shows lack and excess:

“However Emperor Aśoka’s way of rule was absolute and despotic. It even led to the killing of monks. A number of monks were executed on account of Aśoka’s stipulation that monks were to practice properly. Whether by mistake, over-zealousness, or in conformity with orders, the officials carrying out Aśoka’s orders killed a number of monks who were of wrong view.” (*Dhammik.* p. 77).

According to Buddhādāsa’s example, if the officials were acting according to orders, the despot had the monks killed in spite of the fact that they may have reformed themselves through training or some milder form of punishment. If, on the other hand, the officials were exceeding their orders through a misunderstanding, it shows that a despot without a system for clarifying his orders can be very dangerous. But when we look at the explanation for the killing Buddhādāsa gives in the passage preceding the one above, we find that Buddhādāsa interprets “killing” in a different way.

“The legal system formulated in ancient times was socialist, there was no way anybody could take advantage of someone else. Once this principle is correctly established, the method of practice is despotic—anyone not obeying is killed. If this killing is done according to the Buddha’s method, it means having no further commerce with. The Buddha’s method of “killing” people was to have nothing further to do with them. The human method of killing is to deprive others of life, but in the noble discipline, killing means not to have anything further to do with someone. That is the Buddha’s kind of despotism.” (*Dhammik.* p. 76)

If “killing” as the imposition of *brahmadanda* or social sanction is the killing intended by Buddhādāsa, then the case of Emperor Aśoka cannot be a valid kind of despotism, but more an example of the defects of despotism, or the narrow thinking of a depot who refuses to use any method less than killing. Thus despotism is not good even as a method, and even despotism under someone Buddhādāsa regards as a *dhammarāja*, Emperor Aśoka, is not just.

Buddhādāsa not only cites Aśoka as an example of a despotic *dhammarāja*, but also cites the Buddha as an example of a despot:

“Now let us look at the system of socialism in Buddhism. The Buddha himself held to a principle or ideal of socialism, but his method of practice was despotic. All the activities of the Saṅgha are based on this kind of principle. Let us look at this kind of socialism. In the *Vinaya* of the Saṅgha it is stated that to seek out, to consume, to make use of, or to store away even one pinch more than is necessary, is wrong, an offense (*āpatti*).” (*Dhammik*. p. 73)

According to this example, the word “despotic” should rather mean “imposition of punishment without exception” —wrong is immediately wrong. But if that is so, then all laws are despotic: if it is established that something is against the law it is immediately wrong and punishment can be immediately imposed according to that law, just the same as in Buddhadāsa’s example. But if we take it that judgment and enforcement of laws need not be despotic, i.e., there can be laws that have not come from a despot, then the Buddha’s method is not despotic, but simply a normal, rational way of practice. Buddhadāsa also says of the Buddha’s “despotism”:

“As for the statement that the Buddha had a socialist system but a despotic method, it is as already stated: democracy is slow and does not get things done in time. When something is seen to be right there should be immediate enforcement. The Buddha’s method of operations was despotic: “This has to be done and done immediately.” Thus there are many *Vinaya* rules that make no allowances for time or allow excuses or exceptions. Not only that, the Buddha stated that he was above the *Vinaya*, just as law in those times was said to apply to the people, but not to the king.” (*Dhammik*. p. 75)

The meaning of the word “despot” given at the beginning of this passage is like the meaning already stated. The meaning it has at the end of the passage refers to government in which the ruler is above the law—he can obey the law or not as he pleases—and there is no law governing the ruler. If this is the case there is no criteria for deciding whether the ruler governs well or not because the laws have no power in themselves. Power lies in the ruler. That is why Buddhadāsa has to state righteousness (*Dhamma*) as a necessary virtue of the ruler. But he has no guarantees for finding such a ruler, and it is still unclear as to what level of *Dhamma* this ruler is to have. If we take *Dhamma* in this sense as it is usually understood, meaning the *dasabidharājadhamma*, it is still unclear because we can still ask what level of *dasabidharājadhamma* a ruler must have. For instance, in regard to *akodha* (non-anger), do we take it to mean

simply not acting on anger, or having a mind that is entirely devoid of anger? If the former, it is not entirely safe, because the king may still give in to his anger at any time; if the latter, such a ruler cannot be found among unenlightened beings (*puthujjana*), but only among the noble ones (*ariyapuggala*). How are ordinary people, who still have mental defilements, to decide who is a noble one free of anger? And even were we to find such a person, would it be appropriate to make him a ruler? We should rather further consider how far the example of the Buddha does support despotism, a question which we may consider point by point, as follows:

1. The Buddha was enlightened and had transcended defilements. The *Vinaya* he laid down is thus right in the sense that he knew that actions that were against the important *Vinaya* rules were obstacles to liberation. The Buddha was above the *Vinaya*, not because he had power and wanted to exercise that power over the monks, but because he was already liberated and committed no wrong actions that could possibly be an obstacle to any further liberation. That he had to lay down the *Vinaya* rules was to keep the monks from straying from the right path, and was nothing to do with any attempt to keep all the power to himself or solve problems through authority. He tended the Saṅgha more like a father tends his children, laying down forms and procedures for leading them to a good life, than through determining the relationship of freedom and power between the people and the state and between people themselves, as in politics.

2. Some parts of the *Vinaya* are not related to liberation but more matters of what is not pleasing in the eyes of householders, things that householders would criticize. The Buddha laid down these *Vinaya* rules. Monks behaved in ways that householders would find censurable because those monks were not yet liberated: they lacked composure and restraint and the control of mindfulness. But the Buddha had transcended such states, so the *Vinaya* did not apply to him. It is the same for the *arahants*: they would not transgress the *Vinaya* naturally, not because the *Vinaya* constrained them. That the Buddha listened to the views of householders in this way shows that he was not despotic.

3. The Saṅgha community is a special community, a community of people aiming for liberation. The Buddha had discovered the way to this liberation. Whoever entered this community had to follow the Buddha's teachings. The Buddha was the master of his community. The ruler of a country is not its master. The relationship is different, and the people do not unanimously accept the ideas of the ruler in every respect as did the

Buddha's disciples accept the Buddha's words. Also, life in worldly society is much more complex, so that a worldly ruler cannot be expected to have such perfect knowledge of all aspects of that life as the Buddha had in relation to liberation. Thus it is not appropriate for a ruler to have such absolute rule as did the Buddha.

4. The word despot as it is generally used means a system of government in which all power lies with one person and is not limited by any law or organization. The use of absolute power is generally not favored. The kings who have been extolled in the past are those kings who have tried to build and utilize laws rather than despots who simply followed their own views. For example, while King Hammurabi of Mesopotamia had absolute power he created written laws. The Roman Empire is famous for its legal system because in normal times the Empire was governed by law. The appointing of individuals as despotic rulers was only in times of crisis; in ordinary times there was no need to put all power into the hands of one person. Even if the ruler is righteous there is no necessity for him to have absolute power or to make instantaneous decisions as Buddhādāsa claims. When we look at the meaning of despotism as it is generally accepted we see that while the Buddha may have been somewhat like a despot in that he was above the *Vinaya* and had the power to define the *Vinaya*, we cannot compare the Saṅgha community to the state. The status of the Buddha and the status of a state ruler cannot be compared. In practice, especially, the Buddha did not exercise absolute power in the worldly sense. Even when the monks were in dispute he did not exercise absolute power, but chose instead to go into seclusion in the forest. When the Saṅgha had grown larger, he conferred certain powers, such as to conduct ordinations, to other monks. This is not the action of a despot, and so the Buddha was not a despot, either through the form of his own community, in which absolute power was not necessary, or in terms of his own practice. To use the word despot in respect of the Saṅgha may lead to misunderstandings.

Buddhādāsa is of the view that despotism is good when the despot is a person with Dhamma. He gives his reasons:

“When a ruler has *Dhamma* he can be despotic. Thus small countries, in particular, should be democracies of the kind that are Dhammic socialism and despotic socialism. When everything is in order then quickly establish a despot, otherwise it will be hard to control and will eventually fall apart. The operation was performed too slowly. For such an operation there is only

a tiny amount of time: if we are too slow the patient will surely die.”  
(*Dhammik.* p. 8)

According to this passage there are three reasons for being socialist: they are, being rooted in *Dhamma*, speed, and timeliness. These two latter points may be considered under the one heading of “speedy, that is, timely,” or they may be considered separately in that even when something is timely, swiftness is better than tardiness and inefficiency. These reasons carry the following considerations:

a. The first reason, “If a ruler has *Dhamma* he can be despotic,” is an idea that is generally accepted in the sense that if something is right it can be done, or may even be enforced. For example, when we see that something is right we make it a law and force people to abide by it. The problem lies in the phrase, “If there is *Dhamma*”, i.e., “if it is right.” This statement does not maintain that *Dhamma* has already arisen, but simply imposes the condition, “if...then:” i.e., it has not yet arisen. Suppose a king has *Dhamma*, and in a certain case he judges fairly so that justice does truly arise and is implemented immediately. This would be right. But the doubt still exists as to whether the king really does have the *Dhamma*, and if he does, is that case really considered and acted upon justly?

b. This statement takes it that having *Dhamma* as an attribute and considering things with *Dhamma* (justly) are inseparable, but in fact it is possible for a person with *Dhamma* to consider some things unjustly. He may consider on the basis of ignorance, since human knowledge nowadays is so vast and profound that it is impossible for one person to know it all. Even within one field it is impossible to know all the knowledge available. For example, when two people study biology, one studying plants and the other studying insects, each of them is ignorant of what the other has studied and they cannot examine matters in each other’s field. In the past it may not have been so difficult to know everything as it is now. In those times, “having *Dhamma*” and “considering with *Dhamma*” may have come about easily, but nowadays knowledge and circumspection are essential factors for considering things. Thus, even “when there is *Dhamma*” is not sufficient reason for despotism, except if we take it that being a ruler who has *Dhamma* also entails broad knowledge, astuteness, circumspection, and always obtaining the true facts from the people around one. However, all these attributes do not automatically arise together with “having *Dhamma*.” Buddhādāsa should have clearly



explained this matter, just as he clearly explained other matters of lesser importance.

c. The second reason is speed, being able to do things speedily, and everyone wants to do things speedily. But why are we slow? We have not only the proverb “When the water rises, scoop it quickly,” (“Make haste while the sun shines”) but also, “Take it slowly and you have a good knife,” (“Slow and easy wins the race.”) or “Slow is work, a long time is a virtue.” In some instances where speed is necessary and tardiness means danger, we must be speedy. But we must also acknowledge that in such cases circumspection may be lacking. If time permits we tend to avoid doing things hastily. The chance for mistakes is minimized or nullified when we do things cautiously. Also, it is difficult for “speed” and “circumspection” to arise together. When we are speedy we tend to lack circumspection, and if we want to be circumspect we tend to go slowly. We only go for speed and dismiss circumspection in times of crisis in which there is no time to think.

d. Circumspection does not usually arise together with haste because circumspect thinking requires knowledge and a good deal of data, and this must be examined and reviewed many times, all of which requires time. Thus it is not possible to be fast. The more weighty and complex the problem is, the more time is required. It is not just a matter of seeing something as important and doing it quickly. Moreover, circumspection does not usually occur with despotism. If a despot did use circumspection and think matters through thoroughly the result would be good, but circumspection does not usually arise from the thinking of one person, but more from listening to those around one. One who listens to those around him is not a despot. The proverb we Thais like to cite to counter lack of circumspection is “Two heads are better than one,” which indicates that despotism is carelessness (*pamāda*), a kind of lack of circumspection. One who is not careless will listen to the views of others, and so his decisions do not arise solely from himself. It is not right to give someone power, or encourage someone to think and act entirely on his own initiative, without some person or power to balance him.

The third reason, that of timeliness, is not a justification for saying “despotism is a good thing,” but more a matter of necessity in which there is no time to wait: an action must be done even though it might not be circumspect. Such cases are taken to be a “risk,” not “safe,” and having to act quickly for that reason is more an “expedient measure.” Once the crisis has passed, it is fitting to go back to using circumspection once more.

e. Despotic government supports the use of power. When there is no way to assure a ruler who is righteous, clever, circumspect, altruistic, learned and free of defilements, a ruler, even when he is a good person, will usually have some failings. Thus it is necessary to have some way of examining or balancing his use of power in order to prevent those failings from influencing him to do bad things. If a ruler has absolute power he can do evil very quickly and in great amounts. That is why despotism is not popular, and that is why the balancing of power has arisen. Despotism in itself is not a good thing, and a good person can do things without having to be despotic.

f. Historically, the first forms of government were despotic. If despotism really was good we would probably have continued to use it from that time on, but we have made our governments less despotic. This is because it is hard to find a *dhammarāja*. Among all the kings of the world, how many can actually be called *dhammarāja*, real *dhammarāja*, without flaws? Were they *dhammarāja* in actual practice, in every case? And of those who were *dhammarāja* because of supportive environments, as in ruling over a land that is rich in resources, free of enemies, and of small population, how many would still be *dhammarāja* if they fell on situations in which the environment was not supportive? Such questions point out the futility of pinning our hopes on the *dhammarāja* who is almost impossible to find. We must build a system that is secure from the tyrannical despots, who outnumber the *dhammarāja*. Creating a system in which the people still have some control over the power would still be better and safer than letting the power fall into the hands of one person without any clear standards. Such a system, while not the best, is least dangerous. Human beings have abandoned despotism because their hopes for a *dhammarāja* are rarely fulfilled. What they fear is that tyrants can so easily return.

[Translated from the Thai version by *Bruce Evans*]