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Buddhist ethics and human rights: Tracing convergences and contradictions

Azmina AktarDOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.22271/multi.2025.v7.i4a.640>**Abstract**

This paper explores the intersection of Buddhist ethics and human rights, examining how Buddhist principles contribute to contemporary human rights discourse. Buddhism, with its emphasis on compassion (Karunā), non-violence (Ahimsā), and interdependence (Pratītyasamutpāda), provides a robust ethical framework that aligns with and enriches modern human rights concepts. The study analyzes key Buddhist teachings, such as the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, and the Five Precepts, demonstrating their relevance to human dignity, social justice, and global ethics. By engaging with both classical Buddhist texts and modern interpretations, this paper argues that Buddhist ethics can address human rights challenges, including social inequality, environmental degradation, and conflict resolution. Furthermore, it critiques the Western-centric approach to human rights, advocating for a more inclusive, pluralistic understanding that incorporates Buddhist perspectives.

Keywords: Buddhism, Buddhist ethics, Human rights, Compassion, Non-violence, Interdependence**1. Introduction**

The discourse on human rights has historically been shaped by Western philosophical and legal traditions, particularly in the wake of the Enlightenment and the subsequent ratification of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)* in 1948. Scholars such as Donnelly (2013) ^[9] and Ishay (2008) ^[39] have noted that the UDHR reflects predominantly liberal-individualist values, emphasizing autonomy, legal equality, and state-enforced protections. However, as globalization fosters intercultural dialogue, alternative ethical frameworks—such as those derived from Buddhist philosophy—have gained recognition for their contributions to the conceptualization and implementation of human rights.

Buddhism, a 2,500-year-old spiritual and philosophical tradition, offers a distinct ethical paradigm centered on the cultivation of moral virtue (*sīla*), mental discipline (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*) as pathways to liberation (*nibbāna*) and societal well-being. Unlike the rights-based approach dominant in Western legal systems, Buddhist ethics emphasizes duty, interdependence (*paṭicca-samuppāda*), and the alleviation of suffering (*dukkha*) as foundational principles. Key Buddhist virtues such as compassion (*karuṇā*), loving-kindness (*mettā*), and right conduct (*sammā kammanta*) provide a robust ethical foundation that aligns with, yet also challenges, contemporary human rights frameworks. A critical divergence between Buddhist ethics and conventional human rights discourse lies in their ontological and epistemological underpinnings. While human rights frameworks often adopt an anthropocentric perspective—prioritizing individual entitlements and state accountability—Buddhist thought advocates for a more holistic and ecocentric worldview. The doctrine of interdependence, for instance, contests the rigid separation between humans and the natural world, proposing instead an integrated ethical model that extends moral consideration to all sentient beings and ecosystems (Harvey, 2000; Keown, 2005) ^[17, 18]. This perspective not only critiques the limitations of rights-based individualism but also offers an alternative vision of justice rooted in relationality and mutual responsibility.

This study conducts a comparative analysis of Buddhist ethics and modern human rights, identifying both points of convergence and tension. Despite the differences, this paper advocates for a synthesized ethical framework that integrates the strengths of both traditions. Such an approach could enrich global human rights discourse by addressing its Western-centric biases while fostering a more inclusive and sustainable vision of justice.

An Analysis of Buddhist Ethical Foundation

The ethical foundation of Buddhism is rooted in the cultivation of wisdom (*paññā*), moral discipline (*sīla*), and mental training (*samādhi*), as articulated in the Noble Eightfold Path.

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Central to this framework are the Five Precepts, which prohibit harming living beings, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech, and intoxication, forming the baseline for lay morality. Buddhist ethics emphasize intention (*cetanā*) as the key determinant of karmic consequences, teaching wholesome actions springing from non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion lead to liberation from suffering. The principles of compassion (*karuṇā*), loving-kindness (*mettā*), and the interconnectedness of all existence further reinforce an ethic of universal responsibility, where ethical conduct serves both personal purification and the welfare of all sentient beings on the path to Nirvana. This system presents ethics not as divine commandments but as practical necessities for enlightenment, where moral behavior naturally arises from right understanding of reality's true nature. The ethical foundation of Buddhism is rooted in the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, which guide moral conduct and spiritual development. In this section we will explore these principles to understand the ethical framework in Buddhist philosophy and its relationship with human rights discourse.

1. The Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path

The ethical framework of Buddhism is rooted in the Four Noble Truths (*cattāri ariyasaccāni*), which diagnose the human condition and prescribe a path to liberation. The Four Noble Truths and Noble Eightfold Path provide a Buddhist ethical framework that both complements and challenges contemporary human rights discourse. The First Noble Truth's recognition of universal suffering (*dukkha*) establishes a shared human condition that undergirds the concept of human dignity central to documents like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations General Assembly art. 1). However, Buddhism locates the solution to suffering not in legal entitlements but in personal transformation through the Eightfold Path, suggesting that rights must be coupled with responsibilities (Keown 78). The Second Noble Truth's analysis of craving (*taṇhā*) as the root of suffering offers a critical perspective on consumerist cultures that prioritize individual rights over collective wellbeing, proposing instead an ethic of moderation that aligns with emerging environmental rights paradigms (Loy 145). The Fourth Noble Truth introduces the Noble Eightfold Path (*ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo*) as the ethical and practical means to achieve liberation. The Noble Eightfold Path consists of:

1. Right View (*sammā diṭṭhi*)
2. Right Intention (*sammā saṅkappa*)
3. Right Speech (*sammā vācā*)
4. Right Action (*sammā kammanta*)
5. Right Livelihood (*sammā ājīva*)
6. Right Effort (*sammā vāyāma*)
7. Right Mindfulness (*sammā sati*)
8. Right Concentration (*sammā samādhi*)

The Eightfold Path's emphasis on Right Livelihood and Right Action provides concrete guidelines for implementing economic and social rights while avoiding the exploitation that often accompanies unfettered individualism (Harvey 201). The Noble Eightfold Path's tripartite structure of wisdom, ethics, and meditation presents a holistic approach to human flourishing that expands conventional rights frameworks. Right Speech's prohibition against false and divisive communication (Bodhi 56) offers ethical

parameters for freedom of expression that balance individual rights with social harmony, addressing contemporary challenges like hate speech and misinformation (Keown, *Nature* 112). The Path's developmental nature - progressing from ethical conduct (*sīla*) through mental discipline (*samādhi*) to wisdom (*paññā*) - suggests that genuine human rights protection requires both institutional safeguards and personal moral cultivation, a perspective that resonates with virtue ethics approaches to rights (Ames 34). The Buddhist emphasis on interdependence (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) further challenges the atomistic individualism of some rights theories, proposing instead a relational model where rights emerge from mutual responsibilities (King 89). This integration of personal ethics and social justice makes Buddhist thought particularly relevant to current debates about implementing human rights in diverse cultural contexts while maintaining universal principles (de Silva 203).

2. The Five Precepts (Pañcasīla) and Universal Morality

The Five Precepts (*pañcasīla*) constitute the foundational moral code of Buddhism, offering a practical ethical framework that aligns remarkably with modern human rights principles. While human rights discourse emerged from Western legal traditions, Buddhist ethics provides a complementary spiritual and philosophical basis for understanding human dignity, non-violence, and social responsibility. This section examines how each of the Five Precepts correlates with and enriches contemporary human rights norms, demonstrating Buddhism's relevance to global justice.

The Five Precepts (*pañcasīla*) that serve as the foundational ethical code for lay Buddhists are:

1. Abstaining from killing (*pāṇātipātā veramaṇī*)
2. Abstaining from stealing (*adinnādānā veramaṇī*)
3. Abstaining from sexual misconduct (*kāmesu micchācārā veramaṇī*)
4. Abstaining from false speech (*musāvādā veramaṇī*)
5. Abstaining from intoxicants (*surāmerayamajjapamādatṭhānā veramaṇī*)

These precepts align closely with human rights principles, particularly the right to life, dignity, and freedom from exploitation (Harvey 78). The emphasis on non-harming (*ahiṃsā*) resonates with contemporary movements for non-violence and social justice.

The first precept's prohibition against killing (*pāṇātipātā veramaṇī*) directly corresponds to Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which guarantees the right to life, while the second precept's rejection of theft (*adinnādānā veramaṇī*) reinforces economic rights and protections against exploitation (United Nations General Assembly). Unlike secular legal frameworks that enforce rights through punitive measures, the Five Precepts emphasize moral self-discipline (*sīla*) as the foundation for a just society, suggesting that rights must be complemented by personal ethical responsibility (Keown, 89). The universality of the Five Precepts lies in their applicability beyond Buddhist contexts, offering a cross-cultural ethical system that supports human rights norms. The third precept's injunction against sexual misconduct (*kāmesu micchācārā veramaṇī*) aligns with modern efforts to combat gender-based violence and promote bodily autonomy, as

reflected in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (United Nations). Similarly, the fourth precept's emphasis on truthful speech (*musāvādā veramaṇī*) intersects with freedom of expression while also discouraging harmful speech—a balance that human rights instruments like the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) seek to maintain (Article 19). The fifth precept's warning against intoxication (*surāmerayamajjapamādaṭṭhānā veramaṇī*) further extends into public health ethics, supporting rights-based approaches to substance abuse prevention (Gombrich 134). By framing morality in terms of restraint rather than entitlement, the Five Precepts provide a complementary perspective to rights discourse, emphasizing that true justice requires both legal protections and ethical cultivation.

However, critiques argue that Buddhist ethics and human rights diverge in their conceptual foundations. While human rights frameworks often prioritize individual freedoms, the Five Precepts emphasize communal harmony and karmic responsibility, which can challenge Western notions of autonomy (Loy 112). For example, Buddhist societies may prioritize collective well-being over individual rights in cases such as restrictions on hate speech or alcohol consumption, positions that may conflict with liberal interpretations of personal liberty. Nevertheless, the Five Precepts' focus on non-harm (*ahiṃsā*) and interdependence (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) offers a valuable corrective to excessive individualism, proposing a more relational approach to human rights that integrates personal ethics with social justice (King 156). In this way, the Five Precepts not only support universal human rights but also deepen their moral grounding by insisting that rights must be exercised with wisdom and compassion.

3. Compassion (Karuṇā) and Loving-Kindness (Mettā)

Compassion (*karuṇā*) and loving-kindness (*mettā*), as central Buddhist virtues, provide an ethical foundation that both complements and enriches contemporary human rights discourse. In Buddhist teachings, *karuṇā* represents the active desire to alleviate suffering, while *mettā* embodies unconditional goodwill toward all beings (Bodhi 127). These principles align with the fundamental human rights principle of human dignity articulated in Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which states that all people are "born free and equal in dignity and rights" (United Nations General Assembly). However, Buddhist ethics extends this concern beyond legal protections by emphasizing the cultivation of moral virtues as prerequisites for a just society. The *Karaniya Metta Sutta*, for instance, instructs practitioners to radiate loving-kindness "to all beings, weak or strong" (Ñānamoli 130), suggesting an inclusive ethic that challenges the anthropocentric limitations of conventional human rights frameworks. This universalized compassion resonates with emerging rights paradigms that seek to protect vulnerable populations, including refugees and marginalized communities, while also advocating for animal rights and environmental protection (de Silva 89).

The practice of *mettā* and *karuṇā* in engaged Buddhism demonstrates how these virtues can inform human rights activism. Thich Nhat Hanh's concept of "interbeing" (Nhat Hanh 45) and the Dalai Lama's advocacy for Tibetan rights both exemplify how Buddhist compassion translates into

social justice movements that prioritize nonviolence and reconciliation (Queen 156). Unlike adversarial human rights approaches that often rely on legalistic confrontations, Buddhist-inspired activism emphasizes dialogue, restorative justice, and systemic transformation rooted in mutual understanding. This approach aligns with but also critiques dominant human rights methodologies; while international human rights law focuses on state accountability and legal redress, Buddhist ethics insists that sustainable justice requires inner transformation alongside institutional change (Keown, 112).

However, tensions arise when comparing the metaphysical foundations of Buddhist compassion with secular human rights frameworks. While human rights are typically grounded in legal positivism or natural rights theory, *karuṇā* and *mettā* derive from an understanding of interdependence (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) and the cultivation of wisdom (*paññā*) (Harvey 201). This difference manifests in practical applications: human rights mechanisms often prioritize individual claims and state enforcement, whereas Buddhist ethics emphasizes personal moral responsibility and voluntary altruism. Yet, this distinction also presents an opportunity for synthesis. The Buddhist emphasis on compassion as an active, socially engaged practice exemplified by organizations like the Tzu Chi Foundation's humanitarian work (Huang 134) demonstrates how spiritual virtues can operationalize rights-based approaches to poverty, healthcare, and disaster relief. By integrating *mettā* and *karuṇā* into human rights practice, a more holistic paradigm emerges—one that combines legal protections with the ethical development necessary to sustain them, ultimately fostering a culture of rights that is both institutionally guaranteed and personally embodied (Loy 178).

Buddhism and Human Rights: Compatibility and Contradictions

1. Individual Rights vs. Collective Responsibility:

Western human rights discourse often emphasizes individual freedoms, whereas Buddhism stresses interdependence (*praṭītyasamutpāda*) and communal harmony (King 112). While some scholars argue that Buddhism lacks a concept of "rights" in the Western sense, others contend that its focus on duties (*dhamma*) and virtues fosters a more sustainable ethical society (Keown, 89).

The tension between individual rights and collective responsibility represents a fundamental philosophical divergence between Western human rights frameworks and Buddhist ethics. While modern human rights discourse, as articulated in documents like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), emphasizes the inviolability of individual freedoms and legal entitlements (Donnelly 23), Buddhist ethics reconceptualizes this paradigm through its doctrines of interdependence (*praṭītyasamutpāda*) and moral duty (*dhamma*). The Buddhist approach, as exemplified in the *Sigālovāda Sutta*'s social ethics (D.i.180-193), positions rights as emerging from reciprocal responsibilities within a web of relationships, contrasting with the Lockean notion of inherent individual rights (Keown 89). This collectivist orientation manifests practically in engaged Buddhism's emphasis on communal welfare over personal gain, as seen in Sulak Sivaraksa's critique of Western individualism in development paradigms (Queen 156). However, scholars like Harris (201) caution against overstating this dichotomy,

noting that early Buddhist texts simultaneously uphold personal moral agency while rejecting selfish individualism. The challenge for contemporary human rights theory lies in synthesizing these perspectives - maintaining protections for individual dignity while incorporating Buddhism's insight that sustainable justice requires recognizing our fundamental interconnectedness (Loy 112). This synthesis might involve reframing rights as relational rather than purely individualistic, an approach already visible in emerging collective rights frameworks like the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007).

2. Buddhist Perspectives on Social Justice: Buddhist teachings oppose caste discrimination and gender inequality. The Buddha's admission of women into the monastic order (bhikkhunī saṅgha) was revolutionary for its time (Blackstone 56). Modern Buddhist activists, such as Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama, advocate for human rights through engaged Buddhism, addressing issues like poverty, war, and climate change (Queen 203).

Buddhist teachings offer a distinct approach to social justice that integrates personal moral development with systemic change, grounded in principles of interdependence (paṭiccasamuppāda) and non-harming (ahimsā). Unlike Western models that often emphasize legal rights and institutional reforms, Buddhist social justice begins with the cultivation of ethical virtues—particularly compassion (karuṇā) and loving-kindness (mettā)—as foundations for equitable societies (King 45). The Buddha's rejection of caste discrimination, as evidenced in his ordination of low-status individuals like Upāli (D.i.99), establishes an early precedent for challenging social hierarchies. This egalitarian impulse resonates with modern human rights frameworks like the International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (United Nations), though Buddhist approaches prioritize transformative personal ethics over adversarial legalism. Contemporary engaged Buddhist movements, such as Sulak Sivaraksa's work in Thailand, demonstrate how this tradition critiques structural violence while advocating for grassroots economic alternatives that align with Right Livelihood (sammā ājīva) principles (Queen 112).

The Buddhist concept of structural suffering (dukkha) provides a critical lens for analyzing systemic injustice. While classical texts like the *Cakkavatti-Sihanāda Sutta* (D.iii.58-79) link societal decay to moral failings like greed and corruption, modern Buddhist scholars apply this analysis to global capitalism, environmental destruction, and militarism (Loy 78). The *Jātaka tales*, which depict the Buddha's past lives as a social reformer, model justice-oriented activism—from challenging corrupt kings to redistributing wealth (Ohnuma 134). These narratives inform present-day Buddhist advocacy, such as the Tzu Chi Foundation's disaster relief programs that operationalize dāna (generosity) as social welfare (Huang 89). However, Buddhist social justice differs from secular models by insisting that external reforms must accompany inner transformation; as the Dalai Lama notes, "We can never obtain peace in the outer world until we make peace with ourselves" (Gyatso 56). This dual emphasis complicates but also enriches human rights approaches by addressing both institutional power and the psychological roots of oppression.

Tensions emerge when applying Buddhist principles to

contemporary justice movements, particularly regarding gender equity and protest methods. While early Buddhism advanced women's spiritual equality through the bhikkhunī saṅgha, patriarchal interpretations persist in many traditions (Blackstone 201). Likewise, although Buddhist nonviolence inspires movements like Burma's Saffron Revolution, some scholars question whether absolute pacifism adequately confronts state violence (Jerryson 178). Yet Buddhist social justice offers unique contributions: its critique of ego-clinging reframes justice as collective liberation rather than identity-based claims, while meditation practices like tonglen (taking on others' suffering) foster solidarity across difference (Powers 112). As climate justice movements increasingly adopt Buddhist ecological principles, exemplified by the "Ecological Dharma" initiatives in Southeast Asia (Kaza 145), Buddhism's integration of personal ethics and systemic analysis proves increasingly relevant to 21st-century social justice paradigms.

Criticism against associating Buddhist Ethics with Human Rights

The association between Buddhism and human rights faces significant philosophical and practical critiques, primarily stemming from their divergent foundational premises. While human rights frameworks are rooted in Enlightenment ideals of individual autonomy and legal entitlements, Buddhist ethics emphasizes duty (dhamma), interdependence (paṭiccasamuppāda), and the transcendence of ego-clinging (Harris 201). Scholars like Damien Keown argue that Buddhism lacks a concept of "rights" in the Western juridical sense, as its teachings focus on moral obligations rather than individual claims (Keown, *Buddhist Ethics* 89). This tension manifests in practical applications: for instance, Theravāda monastic codes (Vinaya) prioritize communal harmony over personal freedoms, potentially conflicting with rights-based assertions of gender equality in monastic institutions (Blackstone 156). Furthermore, the Buddhist doctrine of karma, which interprets suffering as the consequence of past actions, has been critiqued for potentially legitimizing social inequalities rather than challenging them as human rights violations (Cabezón 112). These philosophical divergences suggest that uncritically mapping human rights onto Buddhist frameworks risks distorting both traditions. Cultural and historical contingencies further complicate the Buddhism-human rights synthesis. While engaged Buddhists like Sulak Sivaraksa advocate for "rights with responsibilities," many Asian governments have weaponized "Asian values" discourse to reject universal human rights as Western impositions (Sen 78). In Myanmar and Sri Lanka, Buddhist nationalist movements have even justified violence against minorities in the name of protecting dhamma, directly contradicting human rights principles (Walton 145). The historical record also problematizes the association: premodern Buddhist states rarely institutionalized rights protections, instead legitimizing hierarchical social orders (Schopen 203). Even contemporary Buddhist human rights advocacy, such as the Dalai Lama's appeals to the UN, relies on Western legal frameworks rather than classical Buddhist texts—a dependence that scholars argue reveals Buddhism's limited native resources for conceptualizing rights (Makley 56). These examples underscore how the Buddhism-human rights dialogue often privileges elite, Western-educated interpreters while marginalizing traditionalist voices, raising

questions about cultural authenticity and power dynamics in cross-cultural ethical borrowing.

Methodological limitations also plague attempts to align Buddhism with human rights. The tendency to selectively cite "universalist" Buddhist texts while ignoring hierarchical or quietist strands constitutes a form of "Protestant Buddhism" that serves modern ideological needs (Lopez 167). For example, the emphasis on compassion (*karuṇā*) in engaged Buddhism often overlooks classical texts that prioritize monastic detachment over social activism (Faure 89). Additionally, Buddhist metaphysical assumptions—such as the illusory nature of the self (*anattā*)—fundamentally challenge the liberal humanist subject upon which rights discourse depends (Collins 201). Even when Buddhist and human rights values superficially align (e.g., nonviolence), their underlying rationales differ, human rights condemn violence due to its violation of bodily integrity, whereas Buddhism prohibits it due to its karmic consequences for the perpetrator (Harvey 178). These disparities suggest that facile syntheses risk reducing Buddhism to a utilitarian tool for human rights advocacy rather than engaging its full philosophical complexity. A more productive approach might involve "intercultural hermeneutics" (Ames 34) that acknowledges both traditions' distinct histories and epistemologies while fostering dialogue on shared ethical concerns.

Conclusion

Buddhist ethics, with its emphasis on compassion, non-violence, and interdependence, offers a transformative approach to human rights. By integrating Buddhist principles into global discourse, we can foster a more inclusive, holistic understanding of justice and dignity. This research has demonstrated that Buddhist ethics, with its emphasis on compassion (*karuṇā*), non-violence (*ahiṃsā*), and interdependence (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), provides a profound philosophical and practical foundation for enriching contemporary human rights discourse. While modern human rights frameworks are largely rooted in Western legal traditions that prioritize individual entitlements and state-enforced protections, Buddhism offers a complementary and at times corrective perspective by grounding rights in moral responsibility, collective well-being, and spiritual cultivation. The Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path articulate a vision of justice that addresses both the structural causes of suffering and the ethical transformation necessary for sustainable peace. Similarly, the Five Precepts (*pañcasīla*) establish universal moral guidelines that align with key human rights principles, such as the right to life, dignity, and freedom from exploitation, while also extending ethical consideration beyond humans to animals and ecosystems.

However, this study has also highlighted critical tensions between Buddhist and human rights paradigms. Buddhism's focus on karmic responsibility and self-discipline contrasts with the rights-based emphasis on legal claims and institutional enforcement. Historical and cultural contingencies further complicate this relationship, as seen in cases where Buddhist-majority societies have resisted human rights norms as "Western impositions" or, conversely, where Buddhist nationalism has justified exclusionary policies. Moreover, while engaged Buddhist movements have effectively mobilized around issues like environmental justice, gender equity, and conflict

resolution, critics argue that classical Buddhist texts do not inherently support modern rights-based activism, raising questions about selective interpretation and cultural adaptation. These tensions suggest that a simplistic synthesis of Buddhism and human rights risks oversimplifying both traditions, ignoring their distinct historical developments and metaphysical assumptions. Despite these challenges, this study advocates for an integrative ethical framework that bridges the strengths of both traditions. Buddhism's emphasis on inner transformation and relational accountability can help address the moral limitations of legalistic rights regimes, which often focus on punitive measures rather than restorative justice. Conversely, human rights law provides structural mechanisms to institutionalize Buddhist ethical ideals, ensuring that compassion and non-violence translate into tangible protections for marginalized communities. Future scholarship should explore cross-cultural hermeneutics that respect the particularities of Buddhist thought while engaging constructively with human rights norms. Additionally, policymakers and activists might draw from Buddhist-inspired models like Bhutan's Gross National Happiness index or Thich Nhat Hanh's engaged Buddhism to develop holistic approaches to justice that balance individual freedoms with communal responsibility. Ultimately, the dialogue between Buddhism and human rights does not demand a forced reconciliation but rather a mutually enriching exchange—one that deepens our understanding of dignity, justice, and global ethics in an increasingly interconnected world.

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