Buddhist States, Citizenship, and Justice

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On December 26, 2006, a small cadre of Thai Buddhist monks traveled to a military base in southern Thailand. In anticipation of the coming new year, it was an important time for the soldiers to make merit and they had invited one of the more prestigious abbots in the region to conduct the ceremony. After bestowing gifts upon the monks, fifty-five soldiers and two dozen women and children collected together under a canopy to listen to the abbot’s sermon. The abbot spoke about the conflict in southern Thailand, the coming new year, and then turned to the need for democracy.

We fight for democracy, but we do not understand democracy….Democracy has existed for more than 2550 years. During the Buddha’s time, the Buddha used democracy for the livelihood of the monks. When one monk does something wrong, the Buddha invited that monk to disclose his wrong doing in a meeting with the other monks [sangha], and to let that monk explain himself. Then, the Buddha let everyone in the meeting judge the wrong doing of that monk. The monks would then think about whether [the action was] correct or not. This is real democracy.1

The soldiers sat uneasily during this part of the sermon and it is quite understandable. The Thai Buddhist abbot touches upon an important nerve within Buddhist political systems of governance. While Buddhist monks fully participate in their monastic governance, people in Buddhist-influenced governments are blocked from fully participating in the political process. Much of this derives from Buddhist perspectives on political authority, which has had a pronounced influence on contemporary forms of Asian statecraft.

In what follows, we will compare the role of the laity to Western notions of citizenship. It is thus helpful to begin with a discussion of exactly what the Western notion of citizenship is.2 What is it to be a citizen? Citizens in the Western tradition are full members of a community. Thus, our initial question could be: what is it to constitute full membership in a community? Below we will clarify citizenship, but first two comments are necessary to help frame the idea. First, citizenship in the US (and all other states) is often simply taken to mean that a person has a particular legal status within a state. In this way, citizens are often taken to simply be what a particular state defines them as being, within that state; a citizen is such simply in virtue of being called “citizen” by the state, which is a purely de jure way of considering citizenship. The problem with this view is that this allows for a very minor set of rights and freedoms (if any) to amount to citizenship. Such a view allows for those residing in a dictatorship to be “citizens” of that dictatorship simply in virtue of a geographic coincidence and labeling by a dictator. Citizenship is not based on legal status, but in the substance of what it means to be a citizen. What is required is not a de jure conception, but a de facto one. This is not to suggest that there would not be a de jure status had by citizens within the state. Indeed, it may be a practical necessity,

1 Michael Jerryson, participant observation in southern Thailand, 26 December 2006.
if for no other reason than making sure a state knows who is to have the benefits allotted to citizens and who is not.

In making this first qualification, and by way of introducing the second comment, consider Aristotle, who writes, “we may say, first, that a citizen is not a citizen because he lives in a certain place... nor is he a citizen who has no legal right except that of suing and being sued; for this right may be enjoyed under the provisions of a treaty... But the citizen whom we are seeking to define is a citizen in the strictest sense, against whom no such exception can be taken, and his special characteristic is that he shares in the administration of justice, and in offices.” The second comment, then, is that a citizen is not the same thing as a “subject.” A citizen is a participant in some way. This will allow for distinctions between citizens and subjects and between citizens and visitors. Notice, this is the thrust of the quote by the abbot that opens this essay. In that vignette, we are told of how monks were judged for wrong actions. The judgment comes from the community of monks. This is the role of “administering justice” which Aristotle references and makes it clear the monks were participants in the governing of the community. This is one of the core constitutive elements of citizenship. “Citizen” is the status give to those, which play this central governance role.

These two comments amount to a claim that citizenship be understood as a more robust relationship to a community than purely a legal status. Again, one is not a “citizen” simply because of a geographic coincidence. Thus, it is worth further exploring why legal citizenship is insufficient for true citizenship. This will also help to set the tone for what is to follow. The basic point to keep in mind is that the legal conception of citizenship is too anemic. It allows for a very minor set of rights and freedoms, perhaps even none, to satisfy the conditions for citizenship, simply by virtue of being labeled as such. The historical status of women as citizens in the United States (US) is a clear example. The key point of this example is that citizenship should not be based on labels placed on people by legal systems and legal definitions, but rather on the substance of what it means to be a citizen. Women were, legally, citizens, but we will see that they lacked important constitutive elements of a more substantive view of citizenship.

Women in the early US, though identified as citizens, were denied access to many of the typical rights that we would associate with citizenship. This extended far beyond the example of being denied voting rights with which we are all already familiar. For example, women, particularly married women, were not allowed to own property until “Married Women’s Property Acts” started to be passed in 1839. Linda Kerber makes the following comment about the early status of women in the US, “All free men, rich or poor, continued to gain control of their wives’ bodies and property when they married.” Women were not only denied political rights, but also basic rights to see to their own wellbeing. Of course, the denial of suffrage continued even after women were allowed to own property. As such, if the governing of the community is primary enacted through voting then those who cannot vote cannot participate in the governing of the community. Such persons are not citizens, in a de facto sense, whatever the legal status enjoyed by the individual.

The basic problem is clear. Citizenship as identified as simply having a particular legal status does not consider the content of that status. Women in the early US were, at best, subjects. While the case could be made stronger by further examining property ownership by women, the case here is made simply by focusing on the lack of a right to vote. Women were, legally, citizens; they were not full members of the community. The

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status legally given to women was citizenship in name only. Legal citizenship is clearly not sufficient for true citizenship. Below we will see that this is because women are denied the political aspect of citizenship. In what follows then, one question is over the status of the laity in Buddhist states. Is it merely de jure, or does it have more substance?

Beyond this basic introduction to citizenship, we should note that there are, at least, two basic notions of citizenship that are worth mentioning: the liberal and the republican. In the present work, we will focus on the weaker, liberal notion of citizenship. We will comment on why this is the case after we have more carefully explored the substance of citizenship. Let us turn to that now.

**A More Complete Notion of Citizenship**

In order to adequately consider the role of Buddhist laity, it is worth more fully developing a notion of citizenship as found in Western political philosophy. T.H. Marshall divided citizenship up into three elements: civil, political, and social. He describes the three as follows:

The civil element is composed of the rights necessary for individual freedom - liberty of the person, freedom of speech, thought and faith, the right to own property and to conclude valid contracts, and the right to justice… By the political element, I mean the right to participate in the exercise of political power, as a member of a body invested with political authority or as an elector of the members of such a body… By the social element I mean the whole range from the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share in the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in the society.\(^5\)

These three elements serve as a starting point for a liberal notion of citizenship. Of key importance regarding these three elements is that there is a progression from an anemic conception of citizenship to a more robust notion. Clarifying Marshall’s three elements will help lead to a better idea of the substance of citizenship.

Each of these three elements adds substance to what it means to be a “citizen.” The civil element grants what we might refer to as “basic civil rights.” The right to justice is notable as a way of giving some assurance that our rights in the civil element will be more substantive that a purely formal status. The political element adds a right to political participation. This furthers the substance of citizenship as it gives citizens a voice in shaping the community in which they are citizens. If we recall the discussion of women above, it is this political element that provides the clearest example of why the substantive historical status of women was insufficient for real citizenship.

Finally, consider Marshall’s social element. In the brief description above it is clear that Marshall’s concern is over what constitutes the basic necessities for a decent life in the community in which one resides. It is a basic right to shelter and food as well as things like education and possibly healthcare. However, the real issue is that while the civil and political elements are important, they are, potentially, merely formal. Here we get the beginnings of positive rights (to education, for example), but it is for the purpose of making the previous rights substantive.\(^6\) The previously enumerated rights are rather worthless,

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\(^6\) Positive rights are those that require some action on the part of others. If we consider education, it is a requirement that the community take steps to educate citizens. Positive rights may be contrasted with negative rights, which may be respected simply by refraining from action. The civil and political elements can be understood largely negatively. For
except under certain conditions. Consider the following, also from Marshall: “Similarly, the right to freedom of speech has little real substance if, from lack of education, you have nothing to say that is worth saying, and no means of making yourself heard if you say it. But these blatant inequalities are not due to defects in civil rights, but to lack of social rights.”7 Thus, the final element of citizenship for Marshall moves our rights as citizens beyond what might be a purely formal status to a more substantive one.

Those who have both their rights protected by a community and have the right to participate in political changes are full members of the community, and have the status of being citizens. The picture thus far is, essentially, the liberal conception of citizenship. While other conceptions of citizenship exist, most notably republican versions of citizenship, we need not go beyond the liberal notion for our purposes. This is for two main reasons. First, the liberal notion of citizenship is largely contained within and entailed by republican notions of citizenship. Were it the case that the Buddhist lay community satisfied the constitutive elements identified by Marshall, then it may be necessary to go beyond liberal citizenship. While it may be desirable in future work to do just this, the liberal conception of citizenship is sufficient for our current purposes. Second, the liberal notion of citizenship is one that many Western thinkers are already familiar with. Given that our goal in the present work is to provide a starting point for conversation about the intersection of western models of citizenship and Buddhist political structures, it is desirable that we begin in a place where readers are already somewhat familiar with the concepts in play. The liberal conception of citizenship is such a starting place. Thus, while there are good reasons to further discuss republican conceptions of citizenship, we will not do so in the present work.8

Let us now turn to the question of citizenship in Buddhist political communities.

**Theravāda Buddhist Models of Citizenship**

The majority of academic inquiries into Theravāda Buddhist governance fails to incorporate the wider implications of citizenship outlined above and instead relegate citizenship solely to the legal domain. If we were to adopt the wider implications of citizenship in analyzing Theravāda Buddhist scriptures, there are two models of governance in Theravāda Buddhism: the lay and the monastic. The basic thrust of the discussion which follows is that citizenship clearly exists in the monastic model, while it is lacking in the lay model.

Although it is often glossed over, the lay model for governance is the most explicit example found in Buddhist scriptures. Volumes of scriptures (suttas) address correct behavior for rulers and monks, and in doing so speak to the ideal community and notions of citizenship. Perhaps one of the more well-known texts to address governance is the *Cakkavatti-Sīhanadā Sutta* (Lion’s Roar on the Turning of the Wheel). Here, the paradigm is significantly different than Western sources such as *The Magna Carta* and Cicero’s *Letters to Atticus*, wherein the focus is not solely on the rulers, but on the general citizens and how they collectively constitute the political community. In the *Cakkavatti-Sīhanadā Sutta*, it is not on the individuals in the community that collectively embody the government; rather, the text invokes the dhamma (Buddhist teachings) and its relationship to a specific person: the ideal ruler - the cakkavattin (literally, one who turns the wheel).

In the lay model, the cakkavattin is the only agent in Buddhist scriptures that enjoys full participation in the political process. The cakkavattin has served as a cornerstone in Buddhist political thought for centuries. This focus is not simply found in texts, but in

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8 Indeed, we will note below one reason for such a further exploration of republican citizenship.
Buddhist political history as far back as the Mauryan emperor Aśoka in the third centuries B.C.E. The cakkavattin and the attributes that follow him, such as the Ten Royal Precepts or Virtues (dasarājadhamma), belies an attachment to a particular style of moral authority.9 Numerous scholars have well-documented the historical relationship between the community of monks (saṅgha) and the State.10 In these accounts, it is clear that Buddhist monks retain privileged positions to affirm moral political authority and, together as a saṅgha, they serve to legitimate reigns for centuries throughout South and Southeast Asia. What has been absent from this discourse though is an analysis of lay society and its participation in the political process.

The Lay Model: Ideal Rulers and Monks

The authors of Buddhist scriptures had a preoccupation with portraying rulers with monks, particularly in reference to politics. This is no surprise as the emerging dominant political bodies at the time of the historical Buddha were monarchies. What is notable about the trope is the manner in which rulers and monks are depicted and how this, in turn, delineates a subservient role for lay society, excluded from participation in the political process.11

In Theravāda texts, monks and rulers are provided with sanctified positions in society. The universal ruler - the cakkavattin - becomes second in reverence only to the Buddha. This point is highlighted in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, where the cakkavattin is listed as one of four types of persons who are worthy of having a pilgrimage monument or stupa erected over their ashes (thūparāha).12 Quite a few Theravāda Buddhist scriptures delineate the boundaries of authority for rulers and monks. In these accounts, a king’s authority is not contingent upon lay approval or support; rather, his authority rests upon the primacy of the dhamma and its bearers, the monks. This places monks in a central role in the decision making for the community.

One of the most cited Buddhist scriptures that discusses state authority comes from an early commentary on the Buddhist monastic discipline, the Vinaya. The eminent Buddhist monastic scholar Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa writes that after the Buddha’s death, his disciples Ānanda, Mahākassapa and 499 fully awakened monks (arahant) formed a great convocation to preserve the dhamma and the Vinaya. They journeyed to Rajagaha, the capital of Magadha, and met with the ruler King Ajāttasattu. Eighteen great monasteries were in poor states and so the monks requested help in repairing them. King Ajāttasattu provided materials and artisans to help. A month later, the monks returned to find audience with the king. This time, the monks asked King Ajāttasattu for leave, to rehearse the dhamma and the Vinaya. At this request, King Ajāttasattu recused himself from the

9 The choice of the masculine pronoun is deliberate. In Buddhist scriptures, the cakkavatti are unequivocally male. Even Buddhist scriptures that provide females a distinctive role like Queen Śrī Mālādevī are subordinated as daughters of great kings (see the Śrīmāladevī Simhanāda Sūtra).


11 Monks and rulers have distinctive orientations predicated on their adopted roles in society. Once ordained, monks adhere to a daily routine predicated on matters that transcend the world (lokuttara). And once enthroned as a ruler, kings are ensconced in the overseeing of worldly affairs (lokiya). However, these two orientations are not mutually exclusive and many Buddhist texts accentuate the overlapping of duties.

decision, explaining that his domain of influence was the “Wheel of the State,” (āṇācakka) whereas theirs was the “Wheel of the Dhamma” (dhammacakka).\(^\text{13}\)

King Ajāttasattu’s articulation of two wheels - in effect, two spheres of law - is significant to any analysis of Buddhist conceptions of governance. While monks do not engage in the wheels of the state, the king does not participate in the wheel of the dhamma. Noting this distinction, Balkrishna Gokhale writes:

> Affairs of this world and those of the next are like two wheels. Each has a distinct identity but they are also like the wheels of the chariot, the axle on which they revolve, in this case, being the human society, its desires, aspirations and destiny. There is also the implication that dhamma cannot operate in this world by itself as it needs the acquiescence, if not support, of āṇā or the state.\(^\text{14}\)

In Buddhaghoṣa’s commentary, the early awakened Buddhist monks had no more jurisdiction over the matters of the state than King Ajāttasattu had over matters of the dhamma and the Vinaya. The laity is evident in neither spheres; while they are affected by both spheres, they are excluded from participation in the ‘turning of the wheels.’

Perhaps the most emblematic example of these two wheels is found in depiction of the Mauryan emperor Aśoka (r. 269 BCE – 232 BCE), whose empire derived from the earlier kingdom of Ajāttasattu’s Magadha. As many scholars have noted, Aśoka’s relationship with the saṅgha serves as a paradigm for future Buddhist rulers and their saṅghas.\(^\text{15}\) Most particular to Buddhists are the Mauryan emperor’s expansive empire, Aśoka’s conversion to Buddhism coinciding with the end of Mauryan imperialism, and his strong and supportive relationship with the saṅgha, which include the dispatch of emissaries to spread the Buddha’s message.

According to the Aṣokāvadāna (Legends of King Aśoka), when Aśoka turned to Buddhism, he sought guidance from fully awakened monks for matters related to the supramundane (lokuttara). Aśoka’s meeting with the famed monk Upagupta is quite demonstrative: Aśoka falls to the ground and kisses his feet in deference to the monk’s authority, “You are like the Master, the one eye of the world, the foremost of preachers, a refuge.” Upagupta returns this greeting by blessing the emperor and then praising Aśoka’s authority, “You have established your sovereignty, O lord, keep on ruling conscientiously, and always honor the precious Triple Gem.”\(^\text{16}\)

While the two-wheel metaphor appears to provide distinctly separate and equal wheels of authority, Buddhist Studies scholar Steven Collins reminds readers of the tension and competition implicit between the state and saṅgha in various Buddhist scriptures. In his work Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities, Collins provides substantial evidence to show that while Buddhist scriptures indicate a symbiosis between the ruler and the saṅgha these “wheels” are by no means equal. On many occasions, the Buddha made rules to respect the wishes and needs of rulers; however, the Buddha never considered a ruler’s thoughts in expounding the dhamma. In contrast, kings would regularly visit the Buddha

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and other venerable monks for guidance on how to govern. Yet this exegetical debate on the hierarchy of cakkavattis and monks leaves out the larger question that haunts political analysts of Buddhist governance: the role of the laity. Rulers need the sangha to legitimate their governance and to access ultimate truths. Regardless of whether the two parts are equal or “equal but inferior,” the references speak to a socio-political symbiosis between rulers and monks. Gokhale and Collins signal political agency for the monks in the scriptures, but in doing so neither locate agency for the Buddhist laity in the political process. If there is no agency for Buddhist laity, then given the discussion of citizenship above, there is no citizenship for Buddhist laity.

The Lay Model: Dhammic Autocracies

The Theravāda paradigm upholds the cakkavattin as the ideal ruler - in effect, the head of the ideal government. This form of governance is best described as a dhammic autocracy. Autocracies place political authority onto the shoulders of one person, such as military dictatorships or totalitarian regimes. In Buddhist doctrine, this is ideal so long as the one person is guided by the dhamma. Although Buddhist scriptures overwhelmingly depict monarchies, these monarchies are not elective, federal, or diarchies; rather, their focus on the dhammarājā (righteous ruler) or cakkavattin - a single ruler whose political authority is paramount to all but the most pious of monks - is more closely aligned with autocratic forms of government. In these forms of government, residents work within the political system, complying with the ruler’s requests. The cakkavattin’s authority is absolute, his rule over the domain comprehensive and religiously justified. It is only when he steps outside the boundaries of the dhamma that his authority wavers.

The monks are critical to dhammic autocracies as highlighted in Steven Collins’ comprehensive assessment of the Theravāda Buddhist ideal society and politics. Collins reviews sources such as the Sri Lanka Mahāvaṁsa, portions of the Dīgha Nikāya, and several jātakas (former rebirth stories of the Buddha). He asserts that in order to locate an ideal Buddhist society and politics, one must distinguish the scriptural attitudes towards violence. He does this through isolating two modes of dhamma, which in this context he defines as “what is right.” In Mode I, dhamma is an ethics of reciprocity in which the Buddha counsels the kings “not to pass judgment in hate or anger, but appropriately, such that the punishment fits the crime.” For Mode II, dhamma is an ethic of absolute values, in which the Buddha advises kings to avoid violence at all cost, to rise above contextual conditions, and renounce the world.” In both scenarios, the dhammarājā heeds the

17 Perhaps one of the most explicit examples comes from the second century B.C.E. text the Milindapañtha (Questions of Milinda), which is a compilation of King Milinda’s questions to the Buddhist monk Nāgāsena.

18 In this vein, Collins concludes that while panegyrics of cakkavattis exist, they are inferior in the end: “This two-tier relation of king to Buddha, equal but inferior, can be carried by the small but significant word viya, ‘as if,’ or ‘just like.’” Steven Collins, Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pāli Imaginaire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 475.


authority of the Buddha. However, neither of these modes supports a case in which the lay community plays a role in creating the ideal society and politics.

Throughout the Theravāda Buddhist texts, rulers are represented as either strong and absolute due to following the dhamma, or weak and lacking direction in the dhamma. It is the dhamma and its bearers, not the lay constituency, which keeps a ruler in check. If the texts discuss the laity in respect to governance, the laity is represented as weak and collectively misguided - in need of a just ruler to administer strong governance. For the historian Uma Chakravarti, Buddhist ideas on political power are invariably expressed through the medium of the king. Buddhists, she writes, “do not seem to envisage a political and social system without the institution of kingship.” The role of the laity seems to be relegated to the role of a subject rather than a citizen.

This is markedly different than the development of citizenship and political authority and power in Western contexts. Most clearly, consider the works of John Locke. Locke’s view as found in the Second Treatise on Government is that the rulers derive political authority (what Locke refers to as “political power”) from the community members. Any power to punish is derived from holding the rights and powers of the community members in trust. Though a ruler may heed the advice of a religious figure, this would be due to a suggested wisdom of the advice giver, not because of any special authority beyond wisdom. Further, an absolute monarchy, as far as Locke is concerned, is inconsistent with civil society. This is because civil society is partially defined by having access to an impartial magistrate. Thus, there are at least two key differences from dhammic autocracies. First, the origins of authority differ greatly. Though in both contexts rulers have a moral right to rule, in the case of dhammic autocracies the authority is derived from Buddhist monks, while on the Lockean picture such authority is derived from those in the general/lay community. Second, the view developed by Locke severely limits the legitimacy of autocratic regimes, by highlighting the need for an independent magistrate.

Many academic commentaries on Theravāda Buddhism cite two scriptures as evidence of lay involvement in the political process. The first of these is the Aggañña Sutta, which evinces a social contract in Buddhism. In the sutta, the Buddha recounts humanity’s “ancestral haunts,” and explains that at one point in early human history the lay community banded together and gave a share of rice to a person in order that he oversee the community and mete justice when needed. This individual received the title Mahājāna Sammata “The People’s Choice,” and was chosen because he was the most handsome, pleasant and capable among them (in many ways reflecting the characteristics of the cakkavattin to come).

Scholars such as the historian A. L. Basham herald this instance as proof that rulers (rāja) are meant to serve the community and that kings are “the first social servant, and ultimately dependent on the suffrage of his subjects.” Thai faculty of humanities Siddhi Butr-Indr argues that this example throws light on the characteristics of government, namely that it is “the basis of voluntary mutual agreement among the people themselves in order to serve their interests and purposes.” However, what is missed in these generalizations of the excerpt is that the Aggañña Sutta (The Knowledge of the Beginnings)

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21 As noted earlier, there is the exception in the case of the Aganna Sutta, which provides for a brief time the lay community’s full participation in the political process.
24 Locke, Second Treatise on Government, section 90.
27 Siddhi Butr-Indr, The Social Philosophy of Buddhism (Bangkok: Mahamakut Buddhist University, 1973), 140-141.
is about origins, not the nature of phenomenon. In this way, this brief account of a social contract for a ruler spells out how a movement to statehood began, not how states should be maintained. Once the ruler is chosen in the *sutta*, there is no further mention of lay participation in the political process. In this way, outside of discussing the origins of the state, the *Aggañña Sutta* provides an exception to the rule, not an example of the rule.

The issue of maintenance versus origins is present in Western thinking about social contract approaches to political authority as well. While there are many problems with the maintenance of such authority, it is an issue that is addressed, however unsatisfactorily the offered solutions may be. Locke, for example, attempts to offer a view based on the idea of ‘tacit consent’ by those who remain within a particular civil society. More notable, at least for American audiences, is the solution offered by Thomas Jefferson. In numerous letters, Jefferson argues that the decisions of the past should not bind future generations. He holds that the Constitution, or any law, should be re-affirmed periodically. The actual time frame would be based on population statistics. Consider the following from a letter by Jefferson to Samuel Kerchval:

> . . .let us provide in our constitution for its revision at stated periods. What these periods should be nature herself indicates. By the European tables of mortality, of the adults living at any one moment of time, a majority will be dead in about nineteen years. At the end of that period, then, a new majority is come into place; or, in other words, a new generation. Each generation is as independent as the one preceding, as that was of all which had gone before. It has then, like them, a right to choose for itself the form of government it believes most promotive of its own happiness; consequently, to accommodate to the circumstances in which it finds itself that received from its predecessors; and it is for the peace and good of mankind that a solemn opportunity of doing this every nineteen or twenty years should be provided by the constitution.28

More concisely is the following from a letter by Jefferson to James Madison: “Every constitution, then, and every law, naturally expires at the end of nineteen years. If it be enforced longer, it is an act of force, and not of right.”29 The claim here is that maintenance of the contract is crucial if the right is to continue. It is not enough for previous generations to have consented, assuming consent is a requisite feature for political authority. Thus, if “voluntary mutual agreement” is necessary, it must be reaffirmed with each succeeding generation.

The limitation of civilian involvement in governance is also evident in the second scripture on lay activity. In the *Cakkavatti-Sīhanadā Sutta* (The Lion’s Roar on the Turning of the Wheel) of the *Dīgha Nikāya* the Buddha explains to his retinue of monks the importance for rulers to maintain the *dhamma*. He tells the story of a lineage of kings who all uphold the *dhamma*. Each cakkavattin rules for centuries by “conquering the wheel of treasure,” namely, retaining a full understanding of the *dhamma*. In this ideal society, people live for thousands of years. However, upon the reign of the seventh king, access to the *dhamma* is lost; effectively, the *dhammarājā* is now simply a *raja*. The society becomes imbalanced, poverty spreads, and a person steals. Thievery leads to the king applying corporal punishment, which prompts people to arm themselves. The downwards cycle continues and human lifetimes become shorter until people live for only seven days. Finally, what is left of the lay community recognizes and nurtures goodness and thus

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society slowly ascends. Moral rectitude is achieved when a cakkavattin emerges. It is due to the presence of the cakkavattin that the fully-enlightened Buddha, Metteya (the Buddha to come) arises.30

The brief summary of the Cakkavatti-Sīhanāḍa Sutta (CSS) above falls short in displaying its depth and complexity. Many scholars have analyzed the CSS for its doctrinal motifs and glimpses into the Buddhist social imaginaire. Certainly, the events of the CSS are unmoored from grounded interpretations of contemporary reality; however, its value is not in its reflection of modernity, but rather its eschatological lens. Similar to other South Asian religious systems, Buddhist traditions envision time as a linear cycle - a continual spiral of deterioration followed by renewed creation. While the spiral is inevitable, we find in the CSS that the main determinant is the relationship between the ruler and the dhamma. As the relationship weakens, political ramifications trickle down from the top to the bottom. In this way, the CSS reinforces the vision of a weak populace, dependent upon the virility of the cakkavattin and the dhamma. As society is renewed, there is note of strength from the populace to stabilize itself, but it is implicit that this ascendancy is only sustained through the strength of the just ruler.

Although the CSS speaks strictly of the dhamma, monks are implicit in the narrative (they are, as we should remember, the audience in this text). Monks are the bearers of the dhamma — collectively as the saṅgha they serve as the living conduit for the other two jewels (triratna): the Buddha and the Dhamma. In various Buddhist eschatological narratives, the health and vitality of the monks parallel that of the dhamma.31 In the CSS, the loss of the monks nullifies the possibility of a cakkavattin. The ruler’s inability to exercise the dhamma brings lay society crashing down upon itself. Near the end of the cycle, there is a gradual cultivation of the dhamma again and only when a cakkavattin arises does this usher forth the next Buddha, Metteya (Sanskrit: Maitreya), and the cycle continues anew. Although the CSS provides a space in the narrative for lay society to build up from the ashes, they were reduced to their nadir by the loss of the monks.

When treating the two exceptions outside of the cakkavattin paradigm, it becomes clear that the lay community is afforded very little participation in the political process.32 Outside of its genesis, the ideal state’s duty is to rid itself of wickedness through following the dhamma and the means to doing so is delimited to the ruler. As Gokhale notes, the king is “seldom questioned, much less criticized, the only advice given is that he should act with justice in giving punishments.”33 The only time that the king is criticized, is by notable monks. Throughout such texts as the CSS, the Kosalasamyutta (Connected Discourses with the Kosalan), Milindapañha or the Asokāvadāna, the Buddha or monks such as Upagupta display political agency with rulers; they act as political advisers, religious counselors, and mediators. All of these roles provide monks with agency to critique political authority. On the other hand, the laity remains beholden to rulers and monks.

32 There are a few cases in which the sangha represents an ideal democratic society such as the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta. But even in these few examples that herald a form of democratic process, there is the stark reminder of their lack of relevance to lay society. As Collins explains, “There is a glaringly obvious problem: the Monastic Order is celibate – what would happen if everyone became a monk or nun?... As such a formal organization, it [the sangha] can exist alongside of, or more accurately within any kind of natural society.” Steven Collins, Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pāli Imaginaire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 447.
The Monastic Model: Monastic Cenobites and Citizenship

Although Buddhist perspectives on lay governance lack a robust form of citizenship, there is evidence of it within the conception and practice of monastic governance. The historical Buddha came from a gana-saṅgha (republic of equal assembly) and during his time found patronage from several strong republics such as the Vajji and Malla, which contained critical foundations for democratic forms of citizenship. While many of these republics lost their independence as kingdoms like Magadha expanded, the historical Buddha retained the concepts of republicanism within his growing monastic community, which was passed on from generation to generation as part of the monastic code.

As with any community that existed outside of organized society (parivṛṣṭaka) the Buddhist saṅgha had its own set of rules that governed their behavior and parameters for citizenship within it. According to the communal rules, once a man is ordained (upasampadā) he enters into the community (saṅgha) and is afforded full participation in the process of governance. In the Theravāda Buddhist scriptures, the ordination process includes the compliance that the initiate will adhere to 227 rules. All members of the monastic community participate in the regulation of these rules, with no preferential distinction based upon status in the community.

Sukumar Dutt notes that as the early Buddhist monastic order grew in South Asia there became a need to allow limited legislative autonomy between each monastic colony (āvāsa). This eventually led to each colony being regarded as separate and self-contained, and most importantly, self-governed. As opposed to the lay model that envisions a dictatorial governance under the cakkavattin, Dutt writes “The idea of the paramount authority of a person - a recognized head, a spiritual dictator, an abbot or a Gaṇadhara, was foreign to the constitution of a Buddhist saṅgha. The republican form of rule was not unknown in that age… The people were quite familiar and conversant with free institutions like voting, committee, popular tribunals, and collective legislation. Many of them were transplanted into the Buddhist Sangha…”

Much of the collective legislation for monastics is found in the Cullavagga, one of the books in the Vinaya, which outlines clear guidelines for communal censure, suspension and probation of its members. In addressing infractions, monks adhere to the procedural rules (adhiṣṭhāna-samatha) and address the verdict in front of the community. In turn, the community seeks a unanimous decision for a dispute; if one is unattainable, decisions are made through a majority vote. Gokuldas De notes that the early scriptures provided rules to prevent the majority from yielding an unfair advantage in this system. There are rules that require all monks in attendance on particular days (uposatha), and guidelines for resident and visitor monks to meet and to settle points of common interest or differences. Through this inclusion process, monks find the participation in their justice system extremely accessible, if not unavoidable; this is quite different than the process found in the lay model that relegates the overseeing of justice to the ruler.

The community’s rules are found in the monastic codes (Pāṭimokkha), which delineates four types of infractions: pārājika, saṅghādisesa, aniyata, and pācittiya. None

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34 It is this historical fact that also points the way for a further exploration of Buddhist political communities with an eye towards the republican notions of citizenship mentioned above.

35 For instance, De theorizes that the formal and collective process required in denying ordination (upsampadā) had its origin in the Gāmini Government. Gokuldas De, Democracy in Early Buddhist Samgha (Calcutta: Calcutta University, 1955), 28.


37 Sukumar Dutt, Early Buddhist Monachism (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1960), 119-120.

38 Gokuldas De, Democracy in Early Buddhist Samgha (Calcutta: Calcutta University, 1955), 80.

39 These four types are divided into further sub-divisions in the Cullavagga, primarily: (1) the four pārājikas, (2) the thirteen saṅghādisesa, (3) 26 offenses that lead to forfeiture, (4) 92 offenses that demand confessions, (5) wrong-doing.
of these infractions result in corporal punishment, but they do impact upon the monk’s membership in the community and highlight the communal method of governance. The most severe offenses are pārājikas, which include actions such as sexual relations or killing. These offenses result in permanent expulsion from the monastic community; in effect, the revoking of citizenship in the monastic community. Moments of lust or agitating members of the community fall under saṅghādisesa offenses. These require the community to consider rehabilitation requirements. Several saṅghādisesa pertain to false accusations of fellow members or intentions to revoke other members’ citizenships, which signal methods in which monks maintain communal relationships and governance. For instance, if a monk attempts to influence another to commit a pārājika offense, his actions and intentions are considered by the monastic community and usually result in a probationary status.  

Lesser offenses are labeled as aniyata and pācittiya. There are only several aniyata offenses that pertain to circumstances that allude to sexual promiscuity, which have undetermined results—implicitly understood to require a communal decision. The bulk of these lesser offenses are pācittiya, which involve the coveting of excess food, clothing or medicine. These offenses require expiation through confession in front of the community—another poignant example of the communal role in governance.

It is clear that participation in governance has been present in and played an important role for Buddhist monastic communities. The value of citizenship in the Western context is, at this point, worth considering. If the goals achieved by citizenship are also valued in the Buddhist state, beyond merely the monastic community, then citizenship should be as well. Recall our discussion of citizenship from above and consider Marshall’s claim that, “Citizenship is a status bestowed on those who are full members of a community.” Typically, citizenship entails the protection of a basic set of rights and includes a right to participate in the political process. Notice, citizenship places individuals within communities. Keith Faulks writes, “Citizenship… recognizes the dignity of the individual but at the same time reaffirms the social context in which the individual acts.” The protection of a basic set of rights (often referred to as “civil rights”) protects the “dignity of the individual.” This happens by highlighting areas that cannot be lightly infringed by the community. Allowing citizens input in the decisions of the community of which they are a part “reaffirms the social context” of citizenship. Insofar as these things are valuable, the status of “citizen” is also valuable. David Miller writes, “I take citizenship, especially in the republican form, to be an achievement of immense value. It represents the best way in which people of diverse beliefs and styles of life can live together under laws and institutions which they can endorse as legitimate.” If Faulks and Miller are correct, then citizenship is not just about placement of an individual in a community in some merely formal sense. Citizenship is also a way for communities to live together and recognize one another in a robust way.

These are not the only factors to consider. If the most important issue in the governance of a community is adherence to dhamma, then citizenship may be less valuable. It may be more important for those more versed in dhamma to be those making decisions about the community. As we saw above, the loss of the cakkavattin and rule in accordance with the dhamma seems to lead to a Hobbesian picture of life as “nasty, brutish, and
We will not here discuss the weights of these, potentially conflicting, values. It is worth noting though that there is also nothing in what we have written above that entails a contradiction in the Buddhist laity being citizens. The claim here is about the historical role that the Buddhist laity have played, not a conceptual claim that rules out citizenship for Buddhist laity.

**Conclusion**

In the twenty-first century, many Theravāda-based societies support autocratic forms of governance. There are various reasons for this phenomenon, one of which derives from religion. There are always political backdrops to a global religion’s birth. This political context provides an important lens for the religious system’s treatment of governance and the role of citizenship. For the Buddha and his small, but burgeoning *sangha*, it was incredibly important to respect the early monarchies that supported them, namely Kosala and Magadha. Buddhist monks were woven into the religio-political tapestry as moral authorities over rulers, but it was done within a dictatorial landscape. After the Buddha’s death, the Mauryan emperor Āsoka’s conversion to Buddhism furthered this political connection as the ideal ruler, the *cakkavattin*. This lay model of governance gravitates around the Āsokan model of the *cakkavattin*, which attenuates the role of citizenship or eliminates it altogether.

The lay model does not need to rely upon the *cakkavattin* paradigm. Within Theravāda Buddhism, the monastic model provides an alternative groundwork for governance and citizenship. This suggested parallel has important historical antecedents as the term “Vinaya” means monastic discipline in contemporary times, but prior to Buddhism referred to the discipline of the learned ones and the law of the land.\(^45\) Traditionally, monks are viewed as models for lay behavior. It would not take leap in practice for lay society to model the monastic paradigm of governance. However, in the contemporary period Theravāda monks are viewed as representing a lifestyle that is beyond worldly affairs (*lokkhara*) and, as such, beyond consideration for political frameworks. This distinction does not remove monks from politics; monks collectively legitimate the authority of states and there are some instances in which monks become political. The application of monastic sacrality in politics does not extend into their own practice of governance. In effect, contemporary Theravāda societies re-enact King Ajāttasattu’s articulation of two separate wheels: the Wheel of the State and the Wheel of the *Dhamma*. Monks and their lifestyles are important for other-worldly ventures, but not worldly affairs (*lokiya*).

Given that lay individuals exist within communities, it is not beyond the pale to suggest that there might be some value in developing a most robust role for Buddhist laity in political deliberations. Large groups within a community may dominate the individual and make any kind of autonomy difficult. Citizenship provides some protection from such domination. In a discussion of citizenship and capitalism, Christien van den Anker points out the role of the state and citizenship that serves as a protection for individuals, “The state has been portrayed as the most powerful actor to tame the forces of private capitalism. Yet people also need protection from the state violating their human rights. Citizenship combines both elements. It relies on democratic participation and equal formal rights as well as on a notion of social justice.”\(^46\) Citizenship’s value is that it provides an avenue for

\(^45\) Gokuldas De, *Democracy in Early Buddhist Samgha* (Calcutta: Calcutta University, 1955), 1-2.
decision making regarding the domination that large groups engage in; furthermore, it also provides protection for citizens from state domination.

While Buddhist commentaries and narratives grew out of kingdoms and empires - and with them, the *cakkavattin* paradigm-- there is an important legacy of republics in Buddhism. The historical Buddha was a prince from a republic (*gana-saṅgha*) and many of the Buddha’s early followers came from republics. He makes a point in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* to praise the Vaijji confederacy’s communal legislative process; in addition, he announces his *parinibbāna* and delivers his last sermon in Vaiśālī, the capital of the Licchavis republic.\(^{47}\) While there are ample scriptures that support the prevailing *cakkavattin* system and its conception of citizenship, there are also significant sources to support the implementation of the monastic paradigm and its role of citizenship - one that is both sacred and historically grounded in Theravāda Buddhism.

References


