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Buddhism, Wealth, and Privilege: Ambedkar and Habermas

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Abstract: This essay compares key essays on Buddhism by B.R. Ambedkar and Jürgen Habermas vis-à-vis the issue of Buddhism, wealth, and privilege, and the respective statements again to what the Buddha taught, from a Theravada perspective. In doing so, it can be seen that Buddhism does not indeed endorse privilege in this world—but what seems to be privilege and inherited wealth are actual merits from a former life. Since these come with their own dangers, viz. attachment and not putting wealth to good use, wealth may be nice but not more. That someone is better than someone else because of birth and inheritance rather than action is, however, established as completely non-Buddhist, again and again, even by the Buddha himself.

Keywords: Ambedkar; Buddhism; Habermas; inequality; privilege; wealth

1. Introduction

In the context of today's challenges faced by societies all over the globe, equality and inclusivity are often seen at the forefront of priorities. The UN Sustainable Development Goal 10 addresses the aforementioned matters¹. But egalitarian values as priorities have not only recently emerged. Buddhism is known for its belief that all sentient beings are fundamentally equal. As a religion that emerged on the historical Indian subcontinent where prevalent beliefs included the division of people into inalienable hereditary groups or castes, Buddhism prominently entailed a reformist element which challenged the status quo. This element of Buddhism has provided the basis for several revolutionary trajectories pursued within the faith itself and beyond (Shields 2016).

The most prominent and impactful event related to Buddhism occurring in recent times was the mass conversion of Indian Dalits—the “untouchables” of yore—led by political and religious leader Bhimrao Ambedkar, himself a convert, in 1956, and the socio-political reverberations that this has had, and still has, in India and the South Asian region (Roy 2017). With half a million Dalits converting, following Ambedkar, during the event, this is likely the largest mass conversion to Buddhism in modernity, and largest in the main country of the Buddha's historical sojourn (Ambedkar and Roy 2014, p. 104).

But Ambedkar was both an activist and a thinker, and his choice of Buddhism as the best religion and indeed basic world view for the repressed Dalits in the context of Partition India of the late 1940s and early 1950s has been much debated, especially because there was a competing ideology that was particularly prominent at that time, not least in India, and very much available to Ambedkar, and that was Marxism (Chakrabarty 2014; Gupta 2006).

Ambedkar, fortunately, explicitly discussed this question himself, most prominently in a very late text, *Buddha or Karl Marx* (2014)². This text is particularly relevant when discussing the pivotal question of Buddhism and privilege generally, a sub-problem of whether Buddhism's apparent renunciation of the world does not imply the endorsement of the status quo, therefore delaying necessary revolutions and perhaps even evolutions and reforms towards a more just society—a question of relevance for religion and theology well beyond Buddhism, as well. Therefore, Ambedkar's juxtaposition forces a debate that is as important today, if perhaps less prominent, as it was during his own time.



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There have been many discussions both on the general question and on Ambedkar's text specifically. But when looking at this scenario, from an international perspective, there is a striking parallel that may foster some fruitful dialogue and comparison, one which has, to our knowledge, not been discussed so far. And that parallel is created by the discussion of Buddhism by one of the most eminent political philosophers alive today, some would argue: the most eminent, and that is Jürgen Habermas (Habermas 2019, vol. 1, pp. 361–82).

Habermas, now in his 94th year, published in 2019 a two-volume, 1700-page work, *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie*, that basically deals with the relation of philosophy and religion, or religion and philosophy, in global-human history (2019). Immediately hailed as a major and indeed breath-taking achievement (see only Mendieta 2020), the sheer immensity of this work has led to a certain delay in translations, including the English one, which to date is still forthcoming with Polity Press.³ This means that the text has so far been locked into the German language, which, given the reality of the 21st century, has led to less of a scholarly uptake of Habermas' points than, considering his eminence, one would have otherwise expected.

In light of Habermas' original background as a Frankfurt School Marxist—a background that has been much debated, and, in tension with his Kantianism, even formed the basis of many a scholarly career—and his importance for the 1968 student revolution, the intellectual Left in the West, and beyond (note his central place in the Mainland Chinese engagement with Western non-Marxist philosophy), to look at Ambedkar and Habermas together, and specifically on their almost same-sized brief texts on Buddhism from the Buddhism and privilege complex, seems therefore very promising.⁴

In this paper, the authors want to do so from the perspective of more classical, i.e., Theravada, Buddhism as the *tertium comparationis*, against which the authors want to look at both Ambedkar's and Habermas' deliberations. Habermas approaches Buddhism from the outside, as a social scientist. Ambedkar is the founder of his own kind of Buddhism, Navayana or "New Vehicle", and some of his texts are seen by its adherents as sacred scripture and therefore beyond critique. Our position is, to use a Western term, the theological one (cf. Ratzinger 2007–2012), which is informed by the basic previous decision that the Buddha did attain enlightenment under the Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya.

In doing so, we will focus on those two texts, rather than on auxiliary or additional sources, and discuss the question of Buddhism and privilege based on these and on the canonical Buddhist texts and their uptake in the current discourse, with a Theravada perspective. Doing so has its clear limits, but we hope that it will open some potentially interesting paths of understanding in all the directions with which the paper engages. The paper will outline Habermas' position more generally, as this seems to be needed due to the reasons mentioned, whereas Ambedkar's and the scriptural perspective can be assumed to be more widely familiar.

Altogether, we have followed a classical hermeneutical approach of cultural and textual analysis for which especially Hans-Georg Gadamer's work forms the foundation (Gadamer 1990; Drechsler 2016). This includes both then that the tension between history and immediacy cannot be resolved and must therefore be borne, and that a scientific self-positioning, outside of the natural sciences, does not increase the truth-value of an argument or narrative (Gadamer 1997).

2. Original Arguments

2.1. Habermas

In the context of a work that investigates the dialogue of philosophy and religion, Habermas (2019) explains the advent of Buddhism in—as all religions—the context of its time without historicizing it. Necessarily, given the scope, it is based on secondary literature, and as always, the point in such syntheses is to get things basically right, which is already a major feat. For the passages that concern us, Habermas' main reference is a German pop-science classic—in the best sense—on Buddhism, the Munich scholar of

religion Michael v. Brück's introduction (Brück 2007), a largely legitimate source for the purpose, as described.

Habermas' take on Buddhism as such is not especially trailblazing—again, as it is not intended to be, his *Erkenntnisinteresse* being philosophical, not religious, let alone regarding Buddhism itself. But both Habermas' intellect and stereoscopic vision, and his eminence in the public world, make his takes noteworthy, as with Ambedkar—one could say, even when he might be wrong or off, by virtue of his special status.

Focusing on the privilege aspect, Habermas starts with the Hindu antecedents and shows that in the 7th and 6th centuries BC, the Indian caste system collided so heavily with “a growing desire for justice” (Habermas 2019, vol. 1, p. 364) that the concept of the migration of the soul was a necessary and brilliant solution (appearing in the *Upanishads*) of this issue (vol. 1, pp. 362, 364). So, there is now justice, signified by the concepts of *dharma* (order) and *karma* (cosmic energy moving towards *dharma*) (vol. 1, p. 365). But this, Habermas argues, did not change anything materially in this world and even led to a certain selfish meditative practice (vol. 1, p. 366).

This is where Buddhism comes in, which “establishes the decisive cognitive turn” (vol. 1, p. 367) by the Buddha himself—for Habermas, as for almost all Western thinkers like him, Siddhartha Gautama *is* the historical Buddha, this is his religion. Indeed, as he points out, the Buddha is—something even Buddhists sometimes forget—the first historical, i.e., not mythical, founder of a world religion (vol. 1, p. 367). Habermas follows von Brück (2007) to some extent with a further socioeconomic explanation of Buddhism, developing from the uprootedness caused by an urbanization shift in India at that time (vol. 1, p. 368). But significantly, he does not stop there—this is only part of the narrative.

Habermas is particularly strong regarding the connection between apparently disparate aspects of Buddhism—of the street level as practiced and the sophisticated theory; of world rejection and social engagement; of apolitical and political. It is indeed helpful, both socio-historically and theologically, that Habermas interprets the Buddha's awakening or enlightenment as “emancipating” (vol. 1, p. 369). It is important to recognize this as one of the keywords of Enlightenment and what social justice can only mean—getting rid of false certainties that may look like reality but distinctly are the very opposite.

Habermas establishes the connection between renunciation and engagement within Buddhism as follows:

In our context, it is crucial that the life of the Buddha, which has been transformed into a hagiography . . . , embodies the ethical foundation of a highly complex doctrine in the form of a universalist ethos of selfless compassion and empathy towards all living beings. Believers from all walks of life were recommended to emulate this model. This life represents an exoterically comprehensible connection between the moderate renunciation of the world of the reflective inward-looking epistemic approach to salvation and the path of a universalistic ethic of compassion shaped by gentleness and reverence for life. (vol. 1, p. 369; see also p. 370)

This brings the *life* of the Buddha to the center of the religion, something that adds to his centrality but that many Buddhist theologians, although almost no non-*Sangha* practitioners (especially in Theravada), would have issues with. It is the bridge from the highly complex doctrine tied to narratives of what the Buddha taught to street-level Buddhism as practiced, the philological and the scriptural approach (see Coedès 1990, *3–4)—*Buddhism*, and that is of utmost importance in our context as well as generally, *is exoterically comprehensible*. Buddhism, it is true, and Habermas underlines this, has been and is often the philosophers' favorite religion, and the religion had a philosophical structure right away (vol. 1, pp. 371, 379). But that does not mean that this is, on the flip side, a religion for people with a PhD, as has been quipped about Bultmannian Protestantism (see Drechsler 2010).

This dovetails with the radical equality argument that was pivotal for Ambedkar. But does the existence of the *Sangha* alone not split the faithful into two, monks and laypeople?

As Habermas reminds us, Buddhism established both monkhood and monasteries (vol. 1, p. 370). But even if the *Sangha* is special, and is a counter-picture to the hierarchical society, the border between *Sangha* and laity is nonetheless fluid (vol. 1, p. 379):

The generous ethos of kindness and compassion in Buddhism shows all believers the same path to salvation. Unlike Greek philosophy, Buddhism lacks any elitist feature of a privileged access to truth reserved only for a select few. (vol. 1, p. 370)

There is no place for the only-me in a religion that doubts the integrity of the soul, even negates it; in Buddhism, even meditation is also for the others (vol. 1, pp. 372–73) and prayers should embrace the welfare of all sentient beings.

But this is especially so in a larger spiritual sense. Habermas basically follows the *Weltabgewandtheit* thesis regarding Buddhism, and with good reason, as “all experience in this world reveal themselves as illusion” (vol. 1, p. 374). Referring to Max Weber (without reference, vol. 1, p. 375), Habermas points out that:

In Buddhism, the life world does not appear as the “mundane realm” marked by political violence and oppression, which will eventually undergo a revolutionary transformation. Rather, it is seen as the bleak site of suffering for a tormented and restless soul, bound to matter through organic embodiment.

This would open the floor for the debate with Engaged Buddhism as such, which is not our point here, but it does bring the focus closer to it. Contrary to most more-recent scholarship, Habermas negates the political dimension of Buddhism as such, even when it becomes a state religion (vol. 1, pp. 378, 388), with which, again, it is easy to disagree. But he does acknowledge the critical perspective Buddhism supplies, and this is especially important for our context, thus:

Through its trenchant critique of the social quietism of the Brahmins, [Buddhism] deprived the stark social discrimination of individuals of its religious basis. While the doctrine of rebirth justifies a kind of natural social inequality for the Buddhist, social hierarchy fades into a merely virtual reality in the light of an egalitarian promise of redemption, and it does not justify the moral unequal treatment of individuals, each of whom deserves the same attention. (vol. 1, p. 378–79)

In other words, it is not the abolition of social hierarchy in this world that, for Habermas, is the goal of Buddhism—and that, arguably, has never been achieved anywhere where human beings live, probably least of all in the *nomenklatura* realm of real-existing professed followers of Marx. But where the mild and friendly, meaning truly human and humanistic, world view of Buddhism breaks with the hierarchy-endorsing religions at the time of the Buddha and beyond is the recognition that social hierarchies are illusions in an illusionary world upon which no unequal treatment of real people can be *religiously* based. That, of course, was one of Ambedkar’s main issues, and is often interpreted as the main one at all, as will be elucidated further.

2.2. Ambedkar

Buddha or Karl Marx is based on three typescripts that were found after Ambedkar’s death, two of which had corrections made in his own handwriting (see [Ambedkar 2014a](#), p. 439). In addition to the published text, the same topic, and even title, is also carried by a speech Ambedkar delivered in 1956 at the World Fellowship of Buddhists in Kathmandu, less than a month before his death ([Ambedkar 2014b](#)), when he was already very ill. In the Nepal speech, he noted that he was not “on the spur of the moment prepared to deal with such a large, enormous . . . massive subject . . . which has had half the world in grips” ([Ambedkar 2014b](#), p. 550). It is therefore a text which is less polished and redacted than Habermas’, but the Ambedkar legacy, and being likely one of two of his last pieces along with *The Buddha and His Dhamma* ([Ambedkar 2014d](#)), makes it very significant, beyond any possible lapses.

Living in a society where the caste system was considered a divinely-given order, and the representative of the one large group suffering the most from it (and for no rational reason), Ambedkar fought as his life mission against this very arrangement, and to this end, he converted to—and, as stated above, recommended that to all Dalits, with tremendous success—Buddhism.

Buddha or Karl Marx and also the speech of 1956 are premised on the popularity of Communism (or Marxism or Socialism) that had made its way into South Asia around that time, an alternative that also Ambedkar had strongly considered. Nepal, where the speech was delivered, was going through a short stint of democracy, with the Communist Party of Nepal also playing an important role (Whelpton 2005, pp. 72, 88). Ambedkar even felt that “if the younger generations . . . are not able to appreciate that Buddhism supplied a way which is better than what is supplied by the Communist way of life, Buddhism is doomed” (Ambedkar 2014b, p. 550).

As mentioned, Ambedkar’s takes on Buddhism were unconventional, and in fact, he created his own, “Ambedkar Buddhism” (Meshram 2019, p. 181). He was no fan of the real-existing *Sangha*, stating that Asian youth see “a large part of the Buddhist priesthood as nothing but the yellow peril” (Ambedkar 2014b, p. 550; Mahadevan 2018, p. 116)—seeing how integral the monk body is to Buddhism, this is a surprising claim. His original approach to Buddhism was not different from that to any other religion. For Ambedkar, religion should affect every individual’s character, actions, reactions, likes, and dislikes (Meshram 2019). M. Shah has eloquently outlined Ambedkar’s genuine spirituality and his argument for the need of an “inner transformation” (Shah 2019). Sangharakshita (1986) classically refers to Ambedkar’s lifelong engagement with the Buddhist faith; Skaria (2015) stresses a special kind of secularism.

Towards Hinduism, however, Ambedkar was especially critical. Having experienced the caste system of Hindu society, he viewed Hinduism as oppressive and in denial of equal rights. As he famously stated in his 1935 conversion speech at the Bombay Presidency Depressed Classes Conference: “I had the misfortune of being born with the stigma of an Untouchable. However, it is not my fault; but I will not die a Hindu, for this is in my power” (Zelliot 1992, p. 206). The main legacy of Ambedkar for modern-day India is perhaps this development of a radical critique of the hierarchy-endorsing nature of Hinduism, more specifically Brahminism, a legacy that his followers have kept alive (Roy 2017, p. 32). In Ambedkar’s view, religion serves as a social force in constructing a moral community through shared religious identification. Ambedkar’s outlook towards the idea of religion was precisely political, in that he stresses that “those who deny the importance of religion, fail to realize how great is the potency and sanction that lies behind a religious ideal as compound with that of a purely secular ideal” (Ambedkar 2014c, p. 23).

In the *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar argues that a true casteless society can only be achieved by destroying the sanctity of the Hindu *Shastras* (Brahmanical Hinduism based on scriptures with elite access to only Brahmins) and denying their authority (Ambedkar and Roy 2014, p. 20). In order to do so, rather than follow (atheist) Communism, Ambedkar embraced Buddhism as a religious solution and a peaceful means to achieve genuine social equality. In an explanation of why he rejected Islam and Christianity, he stated:

What the consequences of conversion will be to the country as a whole is well worth bearing in mind. Conversion to Islam or Christianity will denationalise the Depressed Classes. If they go to Islam, the number of Muslims will be doubled . . . and the danger of Muslim domination also becomes real. If they go to Christianity . . . it will strengthen the hold of Britain on the country. (quoted in Ramteke 1983, p. 127)

One of the advantages of Buddhism for Ambedkar was that it seems to agree with Marxism in some helpful areas, and the proposition of Communism on class struggle and private property seemed basically right for him (Ambedkar 2014a, p. 444). Through scriptural evidence, he argues for a “Communism” propounded by Buddhists which still adheres to the “residual remains” of Marxism (p. 444).

However, Ambedkar does not agree with the means utilized by Marxism. According to him, Communists would resort to any means to achieve a proletarian revolution, including violence, while he preferred democratic and peaceful approaches. For Ambedkar, the primary feature of Buddhism is *Ahimsā* (non-violence) (Ambedkar 2014a, p. 441); this is the first point of departure of Buddhism from Communism. Though he is clear that *Ahimsā* for Buddhism is not absolute as in contrast to Jainism (p. 451), despite his advocacy of peaceful means, the Buddha also points out that offenders should be punished. When justice required it, he permitted the use of force. Ambedkar cites the dialogue that the Buddha has with Sinha Senapati, the Commander-in-Chief of Vaishali where the emphasis put by the Buddha is ultimately on the ends once “all the means of maintaining peace have failed” (p. 451).

While at first Ambedkar emphasizes the similarities of Buddhism and Communism, especially regarding the abolishment of private property, he quickly defends Buddhism against the Communist critique of religion, especially Christianity, that religion “sublimates poverty and weakness.” Rather, Ambedkar holds that the Buddhist teaching is to “acquire wealth” (Ambedkar 2014a, p. 460). At the same time, he goes against the notion that materiality is all there is and emphasizes that “man must grow materially as well as spiritually.”

In sum, for Ambedkar, Buddhism was the path forward. But the Buddhism that he advocated for was distinctive. Unlike Habermas, Ambedkar’s approach was, rather than seeing the connectedness between the disparate aspects of Buddhism, to filter out the aspects that he did not want to adhere to. His “Navayana” was what he thought was appropriate for twentieth-century communities (Ambedkar and Roy 2014, p. 104). Ambedkar’s New Vehicle of Buddhism was, for him and his followers, a “religious revolution,” designed to address inequalities in caste relations.

3. Argument Reconstruction: The Buddha

Both Habermas’ and Ambedkar’s work lead to a fundamental question in our context: in regard to privilege, social justice, democracy, and so on, do we start with them and then look to whether Buddhism is compatible with, or even promoting, them, or *vice versa*? In other words, there is the danger that the start is not what the Buddha taught and/or stands for, but begins with certain world-view ideas and then either judges Buddhism’s compatibility with them or constructs such a compatibility. Typical examples for the latter are, e.g., the critique by McCargo of Buddhism holding Thai development back (McCargo 2004; see Supsin and Suktam 2017 generally), or Clair Brown on and in *Buddhist Economics* (Brown 2017), beginning with a kind of desirable economics and then constructing a form of Buddhism to support it (Drechsler 2020).⁵

As said, the authors’ approach tries to start from not debating the premise of Buddhism. Habermas and Ambedkar do not, or not *only*, start with what the Buddha taught or stands for (and again, Habermas importantly underlines that it is the life of the Buddha that fuses scriptural and lived Buddhism into a Coedèsian totality), but in different ways: Habermas empirically and Ambedkar normatively. Habermas’ empiricism does judge, to some considerable extent, all religions over time *vis-à-vis* his (Western) perspective, but he confirms Buddhism’s religious–theoretical abolition of caste and indeed elite. Ambedkar quite clearly and openly finally chose Buddhism because it seemed to him that this is the religion that is the most useful for his Dalit emancipation project—even to the extent that it often may seem that this project came first for him, Buddhism second. Nonetheless, the case can be made that a genuine spiritual turn of the world and specifically Buddhism as a religion deeply mattered to him all his life (Shah 2019).

This pushes the question, what did the Buddha say about privilege and inequality?

3.1. The “Privilege” of Good Karma: Are Not All Equal?

In “The Crime of the Communist”, one of G.K. Chesterton’s *Father Brown* stories, which are to a large extent Catholic morality lessons disguised as detective fiction, the following scene can be found:

“The Class War,” mused the Master, with a sort of distaste mellowed by distance; for he had known William Morris long ago . . . “I never can understand all this about the Class War. When I was young, Socialism was supposed to mean saying that there are no classes”. (Chesterton 1981, p. 663)

This is what one gets if one fails to follow the Buddha—being upset at everyone not being equal socio-economically, while we *are all equal*. As Habermas points out, if this is not displayed in current reality, this is (a) just obscuring the *real* reality of Buddhism in which we are all equal indeed, while (b) the Buddhist scriptures suggest even a further step, in that what looks privileged in the world of appearances is actually a disadvantage. If to start from Buddhism, not from the need for a social revolution, this is how one needs to proceed.

Namely thus: even though all human beings could attain enlightenment, they are not equally equipped to do so, as they have not fully accomplished their own *pārami*, or the steps towards enlightenment (Dhammapala 1996). The Buddha saw suffering, injustice, and inequality, and sought a path to liberation from this. Buddhism teaches that everyone can attain liberation through practicing *dharma*, regardless of their class, social status, or economic circumstances (Long 2021, pp. 36–37). But what Buddhism instructs as what one should do is an ideal that is not easy to achieve. As long as one tries, Buddhism expounds that progress is (eventually) reachable for all equally; only at the level of progression already achieved can there be difference, since karmic law does not discriminate like man-made laws (Krishan 1986).

Looking into scriptures, there are several examples of *Suttas* that clearly represent the negative Buddhist view towards social hierarchies and caste—all the more important because the Buddha was a prince and most of his followers from high-ranking origins in the world of appearances (Dhammika 2005). In the *Assalāyana Sutta* (MN 93)⁶, the Buddha rejects the idea of anyone being higher or superior based on social class (*vaṇṇa*). The Buddha, as stated in the *Madhura Sutta* (MN 84), regards all four castes as equal (*ime cattāro vaṇṇā samasamā honti*). In the same discourse, he considers the *brāhmaṇas*’ claim of being better or superior to other castes as an empty boast (*ghosa*). For the Buddha, *brāhmaṇas* may be superior or pure not because of their lineage, but because of their own actions. In the *Vāsetha Sutta* (MN II 98), the Buddha says, “I call no one a *brāhmaṇa* from parentage; the man who has nothing, no possessions, who is free from grasping or covetousness, I call him a *brāhmaṇa*. He who cuts fetters, is free from thirst and fear, is a *brāhmaṇa*”.

However, the effects of *karma*, and levels of attainment of *pārami*, are evaluated not in one life but many. So, an obvious question is whether privilege in this life equates to good *karma* from past lives? The term privilege itself does not fit well into the concept of good *karma* in Buddhism. Privilege, if used as a class concept, is derived from the Latin words *privus* (singular, special) and *lex* (law); it is something that is exactly neither universal nor common; it is granted rather than earned or brought into existence through individual effort or talent; it is an entitlement associated with preferred status, which is exercised exclusively for the benefit of the recipient, excluding others from its benefits (McIntosh 1992; Black and Stone 2005).

Privilege, if taken as being above the law, cannot be based on good *karma* because in Buddhism, “privileged” people do deserve these advantages, albeit based on their deeds of their past lives. Due to this, Buddhism views being born into a noble family as a reward that one receives in the present life for previous good *karma*, not an accident of birth itself (Krishan 1986). In the *Cūḷakammavibhaṅga Sutta* (MN 135), the Buddha emphasizes that it is *karma* that causes the contrasts in the lives of the people, explaining the disparity in various aspects of our lives—the length of life, health, wealth, and physical appearance.

Buddhism sees existence as, by default, polarizing—a person who sins gets reborn into the lower realms where they are subjected to suffering and are susceptible to more sin, while those who have earned *puñña* have the ladders to rise higher (*Assalāyana Sutta*, MN 93). But despite recognizing the birth distinction, the Buddha explicitly distinguishes between being born into a noble family and being noble. As mentioned in the *Esukāri Sutta*, the Buddha responds to a *brahmin* named Esukāri, “For, as to this, *brahman*, someone from a high-class family makes onslaught on creatures, takes what has not been given, wrongly enjoys pleasures of the senses, is a liar, of slanderous speech, of harsh speech, a gossip, covetous, malevolent in mind, of wrong view. Therefore, I do not speak of ‘better’ because of birth in a high-class family” (MN 96—Horner 1954).⁷ As a result of doing good deeds in a previous life, one may gain an advantage in this life, but that advantage has nothing to do with one’s moral quality, either being evil or noble. Being wealthy and having good physical features does not necessarily reflect any individual’s nobility.

3.2. The Wheel of Suffering and Stepping Off

As polarizing as the nature of existence is, destitution and deprivation are a reality. Poverty, as explained in Buddhism, is a leading cause of human suffering (Long 2019, pp. 48, 60). Those desperate will resort to stealing and killing, but the karmic law is that such deeds only drive them further downwards in a seemingly never-ending spiral of suffering. As in a scenario depicted in the *Cakkavatti Sihanada Sutta* in Digha Nikaya (the first collection of the long discourses of Buddhist Scriptures in Sutta Pitaka), poverty triggers a spiral that causes whole societies to slide into a state of absolute disarray (DN 26, Harris 1994). For those deprived, material indulgence and sensual pursuits are lures towards sinful paths. Such a pursuit is compared to debt and the consequences of incurring a debt leading to bondage in the *Ina Sutta* (AN 6.45).

Wealth in itself is not the measure or the means for happiness (Long 2019, pp. 28–31). Buddhism emphasizes that the standard of living (in the sense of life quality) is not determined by the quantity of wealth consumption. Thus, people who consume more do not necessarily have a higher standard of living than those who consume less (Zinchenko and Boichenko 2022, p. 234). In more than one sermon, the Buddha has explained the temporary nature of wealth. In the *Aputtaka Sutta* (SN 3.19), he mentions that if wealth is not put to proper use, it is lost to Kings, thieves, fire, water, or hateful heirs. In the *Sigālovāda Sutta* (DN 31), the Buddha mentions six ways of squandering wealth—addiction to strong drink, haunting the street at untimely hours, frequent theatrical attendance, gambling addiction, keeping bad company, and habitual idleness. In the *Dighajanu (Vyagghapajja) Sutta* (AN 8.54—Narada 1997), the Buddha mentions four sources of destruction of wealth amassed as: “(i) Debauchery, (ii) drunkenness, (iii) gambling, (iv) friendship, companionship and intimacy with evil-doers.” Based on these sutras, it is clear that the Buddhist view towards wealth is that it is temporary and inconsequential if not put to good use.

The *status quo* of this world is, by default, polarizing and leads towards immoral deeds. But the *dharma* is certainly not about apathy or indifference to the nature of the world as it is. Buddhism does not promote inaction but rather supports taking conscious action (Moad 2004). According to the *Uposattha Sutta*, the Buddha clearly states that the path of *dharma-vinaya* is available to all human beings no matter what class they belong to, whether they are nobles, brahmins, merchants, or workers; the path to liberation is unique to each individual traveler, but the common duty is to avoid the lures of attachment (UD 5.5—Ireland 2010). And with the accumulation of wealth also comes inequality. Those living in poverty should have at least the basic prerequisites to live a comfortable and dignified life (Payutto 1994, p. 69), but that does not necessitate that all members in a lay society remain equal. One can put one’s wealth and power into good use to help those without it (pp. 34–36).

The path of a Buddhist is towards liberation from superficial wants, rather than needs. But this path is indeed not always the same, and most distinctly, the path of the monkhood involves exiting lay society as a whole, giving away one’s possessions and living

only with the very basic necessities. Outside the *Sangha*, acceptance of the significance of material prosperity is appropriate and even required, even though Buddhism also points to *appicchatā* or frugality as being a virtue, not only for the members of the *Sangha*. But even canonical texts show the Buddha encouraging accumulation of wealth and protecting it as well (Rahula 1959), and this has been pointed out by Ambedkar (2014a, p. 460) too.

Buddhism does not deny that consumption is a part of human well-being. However, Buddhism sees consumption as a means rather than an end, distinguishing it from modern Western economics that considers consumption as both an end in itself and, often enough, the goal of economic activities (Zinchenko and Boichenko 2022, p. 233). In contrast to Western economics, which focuses on maximizing consumption through optimal production, Buddhist economics prioritizes maximizing well-being through minimal consumption (Drechsler 2019). Regarding wealth, Buddhist economics views it as a double-edged sword that can be both useful and harmful based on the way that people behave toward it. As Schumacher (1973, p. 57) pointed out, “It is not wealth that stands in the way of liberation but the attachment to wealth; not the enjoyment of pleasurable things but the craving for them.”

The *attachment* to material wealth will only bring suffering, and the stronger the attachment is, the greater is the suffering (Bodhi 1984). Since this is more likely the wealthier one is (same with the fear of losing one’s beauty, for instance), wealth in this world comes with its own danger, in that it makes it more likely to lose one’s path towards the *dharma*—echoing the Christian, indeed Christ’s, saying that it is harder for a rich person to go to Heaven than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle (Matthew 19:24 etc.). And even if this refers to a particularly narrow gate in Jerusalem, i.e., it is difficult but not impossible, the fact remains that wealth in this world is both ephemeral and dangerous.

4. Summary and Conclusions

Buddhism is about gaining enlightenment, which means emancipation from the constrictions of this world, but the ultimate liberation lies well beyond the boundaries of the latter. It can be seen that in this world, some are born rich and remain so, and some are poor and suffer. The Buddha, as Habermas points out, links this to karmic attainments in a former life, so that what may seem unjust to us is actually not. But this—not a privilege, but merit—comes with great danger attached, as wealth, which must be put to good use, easily leads to attachment, and attachment is what pulls one off the path to one’s *dharma* and keeps one even further away from gaining liberation. In turn, this leads to the maintenance of a balance of sorts, as all people are truly the same; even in their paths towards enlightenment, they are just at different points on the way thereto.

Equality is in truth the essence of the Buddhist path, but it is a radical equality that lies in another realm, not in the destruction of current hierarchies within societies of this world (something that may be explained through *karma*), which however in turn delegitimizes the latter religiously. Ambedkar was right in seeing in Buddhism a religion that profoundly establishes this point and delegitimizes the caste system—there is nothing implied here, as the Buddha says it outright, again and again. Again, however, as can be remembered from reading Habermas, this cannot be a clarion call for social revolution, as this world is still not reality, and in true reality, all are already equal. If one starts with the assumption that a revolution is desirable, then Buddhism is not a good handmaiden for such an enterprise. If one starts, to the contrary, from what the Buddha taught, and what his life may teach, then the result might not tally with what one thought was desirable in this world. But arguably, that is the point, or at least one point, of Buddhism.

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Notes

- ¹ SDG 10 prioritizes reduction of income inequality and its targets also address inclusivity regarding race, gender, origin, ethnicity, and others. See <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/inequality/> (accessed on 12 March 2023).
- ² There are several published versions of the text which was written in 1956 but remained unpublished. We follow Ambedkar (2014a, 2014b).
- ³ <https://www.suhrkamp.de/rights/book/juergen-habermas-this-too-a-history-of-philosophy-fr-9783518587348> (accessed on 12 March 2023).
- ⁴ Kanchana Mahadevan is perhaps the most prominent scholar who has also worked on Ambedkar and Habermas (Mahadevan 2018), but at least until now, her respective work seems to be from a time before the Buddhism text.
- ⁵ A good non-Buddhist example is Confucianism, which an entire cottage industry of scholars tries to make compatible—or declare incompatible—with democracy, rather than checking Democracy’s validity from the Confucian perspective (see only Gao and Walayat 2021; Fukuyama 1995; He 2016).
- ⁶ All sutta references follow, as is by now standard, <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/> (accessed on 12 March 2023). When applicable, the name of the translator is also provided, along with the text reference number.
- ⁷ The source for this translation is <https://obo.genaud.net/dhamma-vinaya/pts/mn/mn.096.horn.pts.htm> (accessed on 12 March 2023).

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