

Ideologies and Dissent

Finding Common Ground
through the Buddha's Teachings

Bhikkhu Nandisena¹

Abstract

It is a well-known fact in the various Buddhist traditions that the Buddha taught two kinds of truths/realities, conventional and ultimate. Within this Buddhist paradigm, different ideologies could be classified as belonging to the conventional reality. While it is a fact that ideologies are manifold and that they frequently lead to dissent and conflict, it is not so clear how they come into existence.

To shed light on to the arising of an ideology there is a passage in the first book of the Theravada Abhidhamma which says that all dhammas are the pathways of concepts, language and designation.² According to this passage, ideologies, which are concept-systems, are created from the dhammas, that is, they are created from the ultimate realities. However, there is another important implication that can be extracted from this passage: since ideologies are derived from something else, their very nature is marked by diversity and proliferation; as a Buddhist treatise clearly points it out, concepts only exist as shadows of ultimate things.³ As one thing can project many shadows, likewise different ideologies come into being from the same ultimate realities. Regarding dissent, it could be argued that it mainly comes into being due to attachment and grasping, due to considering one's ideas as superior to others.

In this paper I will explore the origin of ideologies and dissent, and different possible ways to find common ground according to the Buddha's Teachings.

* * * * *

¹ Bhikkhu Nandisena is the Abbot of the Dhamma Vihara, Mexico, and Spiritual Director of Buddhismo Theravada México AR. Cofounder and Spiritual advisor of the Hispanic Institute of Buddhist Studies ([IEBH](#)). More information about him can be found [here](#).

² “*Sabbe va dhammā adhivacanapathā. Sabbe va dhammā niruttipathā. Sabbe va dhammā paññattipathā.*” Ref. *Dhammasaṅgaṇi-pāḷi* 256, §1313-1315.

³ “*Paramatthato avijjamānā pi atthacchāyākārena cittuppādānamārammaṇabhūtā*”. This passage can be literally translated as “although (concepts) do not exist as ultimate realities, they are objects of consciousness as shadows of (ultimate) things.” Ref. *Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha* of Anuruddha, page 57.

Ideology

The word “ideology” first came into being in 1796, when Antoine Louis Claude Destutt, a French Enlightenment aristocrat and philosopher, proposed, at the National Institute of France, to call the philosophy of mind, “ideology”.⁴

Afterwards, this word took a life of its own and was used with different meanings by historical personages such as Napoleon Bonaparte and Karl Marx, and more recently by political scientists such as Francis Fukuyama⁵ and others, who claim that we live in a post-ideological age.⁶

To one who follows the history of this word, from its inception in the Reign of Terror of the French Revolution until the beginning of the 21st century, it is evident how much suffering there has been associated with ideology.

However, it must be said that even before the word “ideology” was coined, human beings, due to the attachment to ideas, concepts, and beliefs, have been creating much suffering to themselves and others. An early evidence of this can be found in the *Sutta-nipāta* of the Pali Canon. Various discourses in the Chapter of Eights (*Aṭṭhakavagga*) of the *Sutta-nipāta* deal with the subject of ideas, beliefs, and the disputes they cause.⁷

In order to understand what an ideology is, one first needs to explore the two kinds of truths/realities taught by the Buddha. It is a well-known fact in the various Buddhist traditions that the Buddha taught two kinds of realities, conventional (*sammuti*) and ultimate (*paramattha*). Within this Buddhist paradigm, different ideologies could be classified as belonging to the conventional reality.

Conventional realities include concepts and conventional modes of expression. Unlike the ultimate realities, conventional realities are mental constructions. Therefore, since ideologies belong to the conventional or conceptual reality, they are created by the human mind. Regarding

⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), Third Edition, November 2010.

⁵ *The End of History and the Last Man* by Francis Fukuyama; Free Press; Reissue edition (March 1, 2006).

⁶ *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* by Daniel Bell; Harvard University Press; 2nd edition (October 30, 2000).

⁷ See *Cūḷavyūha Sutta* and *Mahāvūyūha Sutta*. *Sutta-nipāta* 415-421. All references of the Pali Canon cited in this paper are taken from Sixth Buddhist Council edition in Pali Burmese alphabet.

these constructs, the Buddha admonishes us: “The wise one does not approach whatever conventions that have been constructed by the common people.”⁸

This passage is important because it is one of the few places in the Pali Canon where the word “conventions” (*sammutiyo*) is explained as being constructed by the common people (*puthujjā*). However, the larger implication of this statement, in connection to the subject of this paper, is that since ideologies are the creations of unenlightened people, they should not be trusted as guiding models of society.

One of the many definitions of ideology found in dictionaries is as follows: “Any wide-ranging system of beliefs, ways of thought, and categories that provide the foundation of programmes of political and social action: an ideology is a conceptual scheme with a practical application.”⁹

Another dictionary defines ideology as “a set of beliefs, convictions or ideas which both binds a particular group of people together and determines the actions they take.”¹⁰

According to both definitions, any religion, which has a system of beliefs, qualifies as an ideology, as well as any political ideology such as anarchism, socialism, and so on.

In brief it could be said that an ideology has three components: (1) a set of beliefs or ideas, (2) the binding principle, and (3) the actions effectuated.

The first component, the set of beliefs or ideas, as it was explained, is a mental construction belonging to the conventional reality.

The second component, the binding principle, is the subjective individual and collective grasping to a particular set of beliefs or ideas. Let us explore this second component, which according to the Abhidhamma, belongs to the ultimate reality and is called *diṭṭhi*.

⁸ “*Yā kāc’imā sammutiyo puthujjā, Sabbā ’va etā na upeti vidvā.*” *Sutta-nipāta*, 418.

⁹ *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (2 rev. ed.) by Simon Blackburn; Oxford University Press, Print Publication Date: 2008 Print ISBN-13: 9780199541430.

¹⁰ *A Dictionary of Critical Theory* by Ian Buchanan; Oxford University Press, Print Publication Date: 2010 Print ISBN-13: 9780199532919. Published online: 2010 Current Online Version: 2016 eISBN: 9780191726590.

Although the Pali term *diṭṭhi* can be translated in various ways such as view, belief, dogma, theory, speculation, opinion,¹¹ from the Abhidhamma standpoint it is just a mental factor associated with certain types of unwholesome consciousness.

Since *diṭṭhi* seems to be the binding characteristic of any ideology, it would be good to elucidate its meaning starting from the Pali root (*dhātu*) from which it is derived, and then examine the different etymological explanations found in the Commentaries and treatises.

Diṭṭhi is derived from the root *disa* which means seeing (*pekkhana*) and the suffix ‘ti’ which is changed to ‘riṭṭhi’.¹²

Three etymological explanations of *Diṭṭhi* are given in the *Udāna* Commentary: (1) they see by means of that [for example] that the world and self are eternal, etc., or (2) it sees itself, or (3) mere seeing.¹³ *Diṭṭhi* is a synonym of wrong adherence.¹⁴ According to this, the term *diṭṭhi*, view, is considered a synonym of *micchā-diṭṭhi*, wrong view. Therefore, unless this word is qualified by another word in a compound such as *sammā-diṭṭhi*, right view, it is safe to assume that it has a negative connotation.

According to the Abhidhamma, *diṭṭhi* is a mental factor (*cetasika*) which has the characteristic of unwise adherence or interpretation.¹⁵ Its function is misapprehension or preassumption. It is manifested as wrong adherence or interpretation. Its proximate cause is not wishing to see the noble ones, etc.¹⁶ Also it is said that *diṭṭhi* should be seen as the ultimate fault.¹⁷

In the previous paragraphs we explored the meaning of the word *diṭṭhi*. We saw that *diṭṭhi* is a mental factor associated with consciousness responsible for wrongly apprehending or

¹¹ *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary*, Pali Text Society (1921). *Concise Pali-English Dictionary* by A.P. Buddhadatta Mahathera; Motilal Banarsidass; 2nd edition (March 3, 2014). *Buddhist Dictionary* by Nyanatiloka Mahathera; Buddhist Publication Society (1996).

¹² √disa + suffix ‘ti’ → ‘riṭṭhi’ = *diṭṭhi*. Likewise, the word *diṭṭha*, seen, is derived from the same root plus the suffix ‘ta’ → ‘riṭṭha’. Ref. *Kaccāyana*, §572; *Rūpasiddhi*, §625; *Saddanāṭi-suttamālā*, §1170.

¹³ These three definitions, which are given to each of the ultimate realities explained in the Abhidhamma, correspond to the instrument, agent, and activity.

¹⁴ *Udāna-Atṭhakathā*, 307.

¹⁵ The term “*abhinivesa*”, (prefixes ‘abhi’ + ‘ni’ + √visa), can have the meaning of firm grasping (*daḥhaggāha*) as explained by *Abhidhammatthavibhāvinī*, 274, but also can have the meaning of interpretation, delusional interpretation (*sammohābhinivesa*), such as in the statement, “the universe originated on account of the act of a Creator, etc.” Ref. *Visuddhimagga-Mahāṭīkā*, i 80.

¹⁶ These four have been taken from the commentary of the first book of Abhidhamma, *Dhammasaṅgaṇī-Atṭhakathā* (*Atṭhasālinī*), 290. A similar explanation is found in *Visuddhimagga*, ii 98.

¹⁷ [*Diṭṭhi*] *paramaṃ vajjan ti daṭṭhabbā*. Ibid.

interpreting reality. The object of *diṭṭhi*, in the case of an ideology, is a set of beliefs or ideas which have already been created and accepted by a group of people. While the set of beliefs or ideas belong to the conventional reality, *diṭṭhi* itself is an ultimate reality, a mental concomitant associated with an unwholesome type of consciousness.

Dissent

The third component of an ideology are the actions effectuated by those who adhere to it. Dissent, as well as violence are included in this third component.

Since dissent and violence are expressed through the body and speech doors, they belong to the morality or ethics sphere. Although dissent could be classified in two main groups, constructive and detrimental, due to the fact that it is expressed through bodily and verbal actions, much attention should be given to it. After all, these are the human actions of public domain which shape the world in either a positive or negative way.

Constructive dissent should be taught and encouraged at all levels of society. Positive outcomes are to be expected as the result of constructive dissent. However, one should keep in mind that constructive dissent, to be of the best quality possible, should ultimately be grounded in wisdom and compassion.

Unlike constructive dissent, detrimental dissent is rooted in unwholesome mental states which often lead to disputes and violence. This is what the Buddha means when referring to the fruits of contention as victory and defeat; praise and criticism and so on.

The Origin of Ideology

While it is a fact that ideologies are manifold and that they often lead to dissent and conflict, it is not so clear how they come into existence.

To shed light on to the arising of an ideology there is a passage in the first book of the Theravada Abhidhamma which says that all dhammas are the pathways of concepts, language and designation.¹⁸ But what is the real meaning of this cryptic Abhidhamma passage? To get a

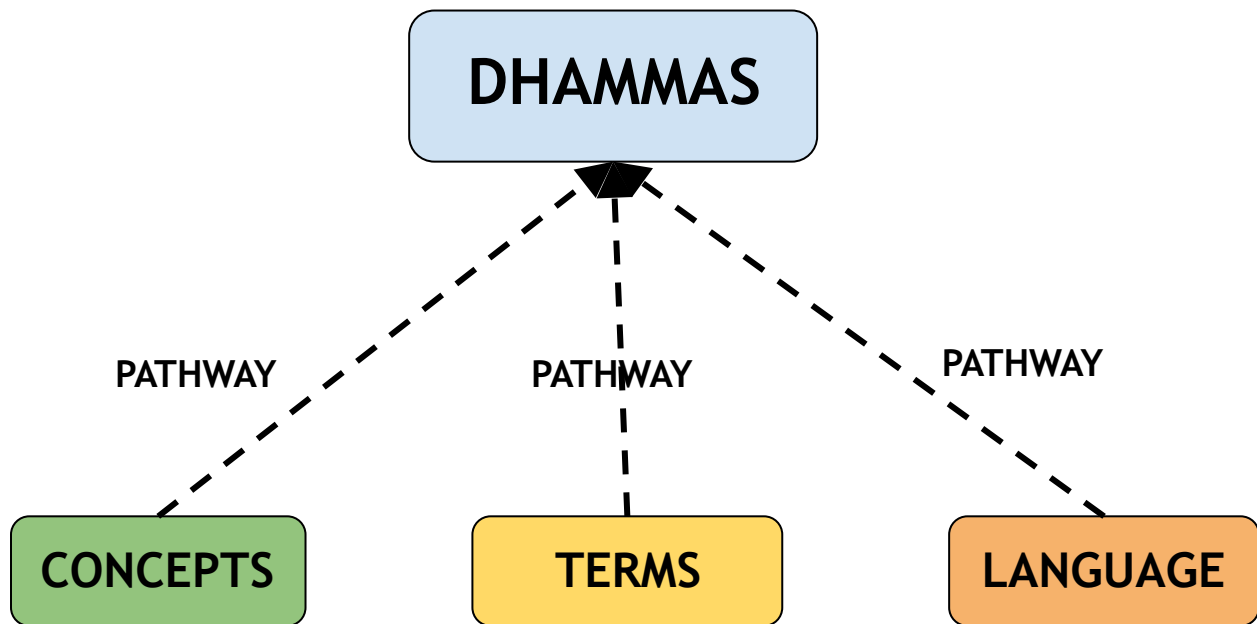
¹⁸ “*Sabbe va dhammā adhivacanapathā. Sabbe va dhammā niruttipathā. Sabbe va dhammā paññattipathā.*” Ref. *Dhammasaṅgaṇi-pāḷi* 256, §1313-1315. An alternative translation of these passages, perhaps more accurate, could be “All dhammas are within the range of concepts. All dhammas are within the range of language. All dhammas are within the range of terms of designation.”

satisfactory answer it is necessary to dig into the ancient commentaries and other Abhidhamma books.

The word “dhammas” refers to both conditioned phenomena and the unconditioned element. Conditioned phenomena, which are the building blocks of reality, consist of consciousness (*citta*), mental factors (*cetasika*) and mater (*rūpa*). The unconditioned element (*asāṅkhata-dhātu*) is a name for *Nibbāna* (Sanskrit *Nirvāṇa*) which is the object of the supramundane types of consciousness. In other words, the plural term “dhammas” is a synonym of the ultimate realities that were discovered by the Buddha at the moment of Enlightenment.

Concepts (*paññatti*), language (*nirutti*) and terms or designations (*adhivacana*), all three refer to the conventional reality (*sammuti-sacca*). The word “patha” can mean “path”, “pathway”, “way”, “road” and “range”.

After having defined each of the components of the passage, we can use a diagram to explain it.



According to the previous passage from the first book of Abhidhamma, the following assertions can be made:

1. All the processes of designation, language and conceptualization are **only** possible because of the existence of the dhammas, the final components of existence.
2. Conventional reality is **always** a mental construction.
3. There can be many conventional realities. This means that the realm of conventional reality allows for the existence and coexistence of all sorts of concepts. Opposing concepts can both be true within the realm of conventional reality.
4. Often these conventional realities fall within the category of wrong views, that is, they do not have a corresponding entity within the ultimate reality.
5. A correct understanding of each of the four previous assertions should lead us towards the recognition of the relativity of the conventional reality, and this should lead us towards a more enlightened and peaceful world.

In general, according to this Abhidhamma passage, it can be said that each culture, each religion, and each civilization, establishes a particular “pathway” to the “dhammas” resulting in distinct art forms, distinct belief systems, distinct languages, and so on. This also applies to ideologies which are concept-systems that are created from the dhammas.

However, there is another important implication that can be extracted from this passage: since ideologies are derived from something else, their very nature is marked by diversity and proliferation; as a Buddhist treatise clearly points it out, concepts only exist as shadows of ultimate things.¹⁹ As one thing can project many shadows, likewise different ideologies come into being from the same ultimate realities.

After having focused our attention and analyzed the subject of ideologies, their origin, and dissent, the following question arises: how can we find common ground through the Buddha’s Teachings?

¹⁹ “*Paramatthato avijjamānā pi atthacchāyākārena cittuppādānamārammaṇabhūtā*”. This passage can be literally translated as “although (concepts) do not exist as ultimate realities, they are objects of consciousness as shadows of (ultimate) things.” Ref. *Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha* of Anuruddha, page 57.

Finding Common Ground through the Buddha's Teachings

Since wisdom and compassion are the two main principles of Buddhism, it is through them that one should search for common ground with respect to divergent ideologies and beliefs.

Before it was said that the understanding of ideologies by what they really are, that is, mental constructions which are only true in a relative way, should lead us towards a more enlightened and peaceful world.

Wisdom regarding ideologies means two things: (1) understanding their true nature as a derived reality subject to diversity and proliferation, and (2) understanding the tendency of the human mind to grasp or adhere to them through wrong views as “this is mine”, “I am that”, etc., or through desire or attachment.

To arrive to any of these two kinds of understanding, one needs to practice meditation or mind development (*bhāvanā*). Without a clear understanding of the nature of reality, which comes through insight meditation, it is unlikely that one will attain this kind of wisdom, necessary for finding common ground regarding different ideologies and beliefs. Furthermore, although at the present time there is an increasing number of people interested in meditation, those who have developed this type of right view are minuscule.

Compassion regarding ideologies means cultivating and possessing virtues like respect and tolerance, but above all, developing the quality of considering the rest of humankind, irrespective of ideologies and beliefs, as oneself.

This path of compassion, which is based on seeing others as oneself, should be taught and cultivated. It is through compassion that humankind can move steadily towards a common ground, towards a more peaceful world.

Before it was mentioned that certain thinkers claim that we live in a post-ideological age, meaning that humanity has found the “right ideology”²⁰ needed to live in peace and prosperity. However, according to Buddhism, there cannot be only one right ideology because, as it was said, ideologies are conventions created by ordinary, unenlightened people.

²⁰ According to Fukuyama liberal democracies and free market capitalism would be the end of history and ideology.

The Buddha says that ultimately we need to go beyond ideologies and beliefs, that there exists a safe common ground which is a sphere where there are no factions or disputes (*avivāda-bhūmi*).²¹ To reach this common ground one needs to practice and fulfill the path of wisdom.

* * * * *

²¹ This is taken from the Mahābyūha Sutta: “I say that there are two outcomes of disputes [victory and defeat]. Having seen this, one should not dispute seeing that Security [is found] in the ground where there are no disputes.” This is the translation of the Pali passage: “*Duṅhe vivādassa phalāni brūmi. Etam pi disvā na vivādayetha, Khemābhipassaṃ avivādashūmiṃ.*”