

‘Awakening Society’: The Tipiṅka Interpretation by Systems Theory Approach

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Introduction:

The question whether a human being is a social animal¹ is irrelevant now, however the question whether a human being can become an advanced social human being² is worth to explore. The concept of society which is the environment that human beings create may be questioned by some people of its existence. An example was British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s interview in 1987. She said “there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families.”³ This illustration has created some controversies among sociologists⁴ and possibly scholars in other disciplines.

Scholars who studies Buddhism, which as a religion is one of the cultural system and a subsystem of society, should also participate in the above issues. Therefore this article tries to start with some of these questions. How Buddhist scholars perceive and explain the concept of society? Do we believe in the existing of the society or vice versa? What is the ideal society that Buddhist scholars perceived? How are those ideal societies compliant to Buddhist Principles? Is it possible to interpret the concept of Buddhist ideal society in other ways and what will be the result?

In order to discuss these questions, this article will use Systems Theory approach as a conceptual framework for explanation. Although this group of theories is composed of various explanations and developments, only some of them will be experimented and utilized here. The Tipiṅka will be used as an example and reference to comprehend the social system that will be the model. The area of analysis in this article is mostly focus on conventional truth (sammata-sacca) and mundane states (lokiya-dhamma) rather than absolute truth (paramattha-sacca) or supermundane states (lokuttara-dhamma) however the later may be referred to as the major principle of Buddhism.

The purpose of this article is to challenge our perspective and explore the new possibility in explaining society and ideal society by blending Buddha-dhamma and the conceptual framework of Systems Theory. This article intends to analyze the society using only macro level of analysis instead of other contemporary analysis such as micro-macro integration, complex dynamical systems, etc. This intention is to be an anti-thesis of many Buddhist works in micro level of analysis. This experiment will need further synthesis development and will appreciate any comments and suggestions.

Society in Buddhist Perspective:

Buddhist scholars have perceived the concept of society in a broad span or spectrum. Some believe that the Buddha taught only pure soteriology and he was not social reformer.⁵ Others may

¹ Many sociologists and other scholars such as George Herbert Mead, Émile Durkheim, Karl Marx, etc. have studied the formation and development of social human being and came out with different theories and explanations.

² Sociobiologists study the concept of reciprocal altruism as one of the advanced social human being. John Archer, “Sociobiology”, *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social Psychology*, (1999): 618-623.

³ Larry Ray, “Society”, *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, (2007): 4589.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4590. Richard Francis Gombrich: *A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo* (London & New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988), pp. 29-30

⁵ Richard Francis Gombrich: *A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo* (London & New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988), pp. 29-30

agree in the existing of Buddhist social principle but differ in perspectives. There may be at least 4 groups of explanations according to how they explain causes of social problems, solutions and the ideal society.

The first group is “reductionism and non-social systems”. This group believes that “there is no such thing as society.” Society is only composed of individuals and the so called social problems are caused by each individual. The solution according to these Buddhist scholars is to educate or socialize each individual as many as possible in order to have numerous good persons. It perceives Buddha-dhamma and personal objective as the same as social phenomena and social goals. The more individuals practice dhamma and become ethical persons, the less social problems will occur. This kind of explanation can be called as linear perspective because it explains that social problems came from people so the solutions should be corrected at the individual level. It may be sound logical and it may be a necessary condition but is it a sufficient condition and will it be true? How will this group explain and manage the persons with unethical behavior such as murderer, thief. How will ethical persons have to interrelate with these ones? Does ethical person have to accept as kamma and vipāka? Moreover, in the situations which are difficult to socialize people such as war, economic crisis and cultural riot, etc., how will this group explain the problems and find out the solution from these structural problems?

In the Tipiṭaka, the Buddha applied “non social system” only a period of time when the Saṅgha was full of noble ones (ariyapuggala)⁶. The Buddha refused the venerable Sariputta to set up course of training for disciples and appoint the Pāṭimokkha because the Buddha wanted to wait “until some conditions causing the cankers appear here in the Order”⁷ and “some conditions, Sariputta, causing the cankers do not so much as appear here in the Order until the Order has attained full development.”⁸ The Order here is the Sangha or the society and the course of training and the Pāṭimokkha can interpret as social structure and social order.

The second group is “reductionism and asocial systems”. This group believes in individual and the existing of society but the goal or freedom will not happen by attached in any forms of society. One example is “Buddhism and Revolution”.⁹ It is focus on doctrine of nonself (anattā) and the doctrine of kamma which lay down the Buddhist worldview toward no possession, action-reaction between individual and social system and bondage or ‘unfreedom’ from the determination of present social and political institutions. However, this external social setting cannot prevent individual from attaining freedom. They point out that “an individual is free when he no longer clings to his "self," or to the psychological and social identities, attachments, and loyalties which produced the idea of self”¹⁰ and “a free man lives in society but is not of it.”¹¹

This perspective points out some benefit of the unattached to any form of social system and change is perpetual however this view cannot explain how change will be occurred.

The third group is “holism but undefined social systems.” This one believes that there are group of dhamma for social structure which applies from individual to collective. They perceive the separation and coexistence between social structure and individual. One of the examples is “The Three Institutional Poisons: Challenging Collective Greed, Ill Will, & Delusion.”¹² It applied self, dukkha and kamma from individual to collective. Moreover, the three unwholesome roots (akusalamūla) which are greed (lobha), ill will or hatred (dosa) and delusion (moha) also become not only

⁶ PTS. Vin III, 7-10.

⁷ PTS. Vin III, 9.

⁸ PTS. Vin III, 9-10.

⁹ R. Puligandla and K. Puhakka, “Buddhism and Revolution”, *Philosophy East & West*, Vol.20 No. 4 (October 1970): 345-354.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.352.

¹¹ *Op. cit.*

¹² David R. Loy, “The Three Institutional Poisons: Challenging Collective Greed, Ill Will, & Delusion”, *Insight Journal*, (Winter 2006): 4-8.

collective but also institutionalized as economic system especially consumerism, militarism and corporate media. The solutions cannot be found but can work together by starting with personal spiritual practice, commitment to non-violence, and awakening together for all of us.¹³ The ideal society should be a dharmic society that “would have institutions encouraging generosity and compassion, grounded in a wisdom that recognizes our inter-connectedness.”¹⁴

The strength of this group is the concept of institutionalized the three unwholesome roots as well as the interrelation among the individual, however the ideal society needs more exploration.

The fourth group is “holism & defined good society.” One of the examples is “A Buddhist Concept of Good Community.”¹⁵ This group presents the application of dhamma to explain the social structure by comparing to individual. The ideal society is proposed by social philosophy approach through the concept of justice, right, freedom and ruler of the state.

This perspective challenges the western social philosophy and initiate Buddhist concept such as loving kindness, communalism, kamma, paticcasamuppannadhamma and virtue as fundamental to good society. Nevertheless, this view does not explain how these Buddhist concepts will form any realistic social system.

From these four groups (figure 1), we may summarize into two levels of analysis. The first one explains and solves social problems in the individual level while the second one uses both individual and the social level. The later perceives only reducing to individual is not sufficient because society has developed social forms and structure as an abstract entity or collective self. This collective self performs its goal, interrelation and function separately from each individual.

Scholars who study society also have different explanations towards a social system. Some perceive one as a non social system; some see it as an asocial system, while others concur with the social system. However, these views are mostly studied in Philosophy or structuralism. Could a social system possibly be studied as in Systems Theory or functionalism social system? We will try to find out in next section.

Figure 1: Society in Some Buddhist Perspectives.

Society in Buddhist Perspective						
Object of Study Level of Analysis	Individual	Society				
		Non Social System	Asocial System	Social System		
				Philosophy/ Structuralism		Systems Theory/ Structural-Functionalism
				Undefined	Defined	
Holism				3	4	?
Reductionism	Only Pure Soteriology	1	2			

1. reductionism and non social systems	2. reductionism and asocial systems
3. holism but undefined social systems	4. holism & defined good society

¹³ Ibid., p.8.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.7.

¹⁵ Somparn Promta, “A Buddhist Concept of Good Community”, Bunditsuksa Parithad (บัณฑิตศึกษาปริทรรศน์), Vol.3, No, 1 (January-March 2007): 69-115.

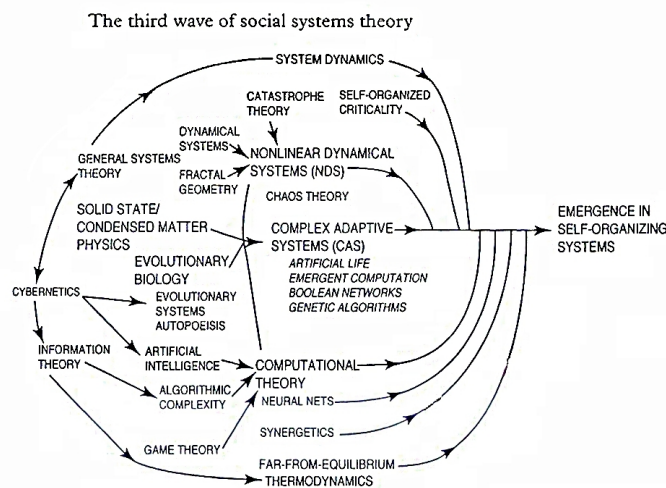
Systems Theory Approach

A system can be defined as a set of interacting units or ‘a set of objects together with relationships among the objects’.¹⁶ This definition implies that a system has properties, functions, and dynamics distinct from its constituent objects and relationships.¹⁷ The term of system also refers to ‘the holistic structure which controls all constituent phenomena’.¹⁸ In this case systems provide ‘the idea of structure in which degrees of freedom are limited and in which a special kind of total rationality is enacted’.¹⁹

The systems to be focused in this article are social systems. There are three general approaches to studying social systems as holistic: functionalist and neofunctionalist theories (identified particularly with Parsons); the historical, Marxian approach; and actor oriented, dynamic system theories.²⁰ Functionalist and neofunctionalist theories or systems theory will be the approach to utilize here.

Social complexity was analyzed and compared to other systems such as mechanistic systems in eighteenth century, organic systems in nineteenth century and cybernetic systems in the first half of twentieth century. By that time Talcott Parsons (1902–1979) introduced social systems theory in his book ‘The Social System’ (1951) as well as many others following. Parsons’ Systems Theory is also named as the first wave of social systems theory.²¹ The second wave comes from several scholars who dedicate their works in the name of General Systems Theory and Chaos Theory. The third wave of social systems theory includes Emergence and Complexity Theory. Figure 2 shows some key theories along the development of social systems theory.

Figure 2: The historical development of third-wave emergence theory



Source: R, Keith Sawyer, **Social Emergence: Societies as Complex Systems**, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 21. Quoted from Jeffrey Goldstein, “Emergence as a construct: History and issues.” **Emergence**, 1(1999): 55

¹⁶ Tom Burns, “system theories”, **The Black Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology**, (2007): 4922.

¹⁷ **Op., cit.**

¹⁸ Armin Nassehi, “systems theory”, **Encyclopedia of Social Theory**, (Routledge, 2006): 617.

¹⁹ **Ibid.**, p.617-618.

²⁰ Tom Burns, **Ibid.**, p. 4922.

²¹ R, Keith Sawyer, **Social Emergence: Societies as Complex Systems**, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 12.

Among the various development of social systems theory, Armin Nassehi has concluded systems theory into seven basic ideas.²²

- 1) A system is the result of interactions of its parts, not the other way round (the parts are not outcomes of the system).
- 2) These interactions have a temporal dimension, insofar as the operations of a system have to reproduce themselves by connecting individual events in succession.
- 3) The present state of a system is the result of its past operations.
- 4) The system's dependency on its own processing and the operational connectedness of its interactions constitute a boundary between the system and its environment.
- 5) The relation between system and environment is an asymmetric relation, insofar as changes in the environment do not bring about linear effects inside a system; rather, a system can adapt to changes in its environment only by its own operations.
- 6) Systems are areas of reduced and enforced complexity: on the one hand, a system reduces the possibilities of its operations; on the other hand, this reduction of possibilities is the precondition of its ability to develop a special kind of complexity.
- 7) Systems theory is concerned with mechanisms of possible order in the face of an improbability of order.

This article will utilize Parsons' Social Systems Theory as the beginning of the conceptual framework for interpretation. Although this effort may be criticized that Parsons' theory is "too inflexible in many of its analytical assumptions"²³ and is emphasized on system's structure stability, the fact is that Parsons' contributions to sociological theory "still worthy of application, refinement, renewal, and extension. It is fair to say that its potential still calls for efforts of realization"²⁴ and hope that it will be useful for Buddhist scholars to consider as a conceptual framework of analysis. Moreover his theory also extended to explain evolution changes.

One part of Parsons' works is to introduce a general four-function scheme or AGIL scheme which is necessary or requisite functions for any social systems. If these four functions are well performed in the system, the society will be stable and sustainable. James M. Murphy has concluded these functions as following²⁵:

- 1) Adaptation (A) is an instrumental function by which a system adapts to its external environment or adapts the external environment to the system.
- 2) Goal attainment (G) is a consummatory function that defines the goals and ends of a system and mobilizes resources to attain them. Goal attainment is generally oriented externally.
- 3) Integration (I) is a consummatory function that manages the interrelationships of the parts of a system. The integration function maintains internal coherence and solidarity within the system.
- 4) Latent (L) pattern maintenance is an instrumental function that supplies all actors in the system with a source of motivation. It provides normative patterns and manages the tensions of actors internal to the system.

Figure 3 will illustrate the relations between instrumental/consummatory function (or simply think of mean/end) and internal/external area of action for those functions.

²² Armin Nassehi, "systems theory", *Ibid.*, p. 618.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 619.

²⁴ Richard Münch, "Parsons, Talcott", *Encyclopedia of Social Theory*, Vol. 2 (Sage, 2005): 555.

²⁵ James M. Murphy, "AGIL", *Encyclopedia of Social Theory*, Vol. 1 (Sage, 2005): 6-7.

Figure 3: Parsons' Four Function Scheme - AGIL

Parsons' Four Function Scheme -AGIL		
Function Area of Action	Instrumental	Consummatory
External	Adaptation (A)	Goal attainment (G)
Internal	Latent (L)	Integration (I)

Parsons and his colleagues also introduced a four action subsystem for any systems and they are related to his AGIL scheme. These subsystems²⁶ are composed of different four subsystems according to any given systems. In social system the subsystems are as following.

- 1) Economic system performs Adaptation (A) function.
- 2) Polity or Political system performs Goal attainment (G) function.
- 3) Societal community performs Integration (I) function.
- 4) Fiduciary system (or Cultural system) performs Latent (L) function.

Figure 4 will clarify the four action subsystems combine with the AGIL scheme.

Figure 4: Parsons' Four Action Subsystem and AGIL

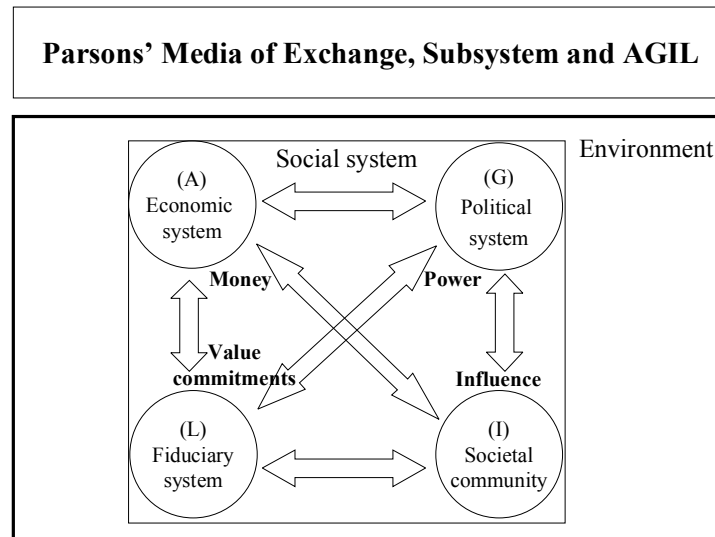
Parsons' Four Action Subsystem and AGIL				
Function System	Adaptation (A)	Goal attainment (G)	Integration (I)	Latent (L)
Social system	Economic system	Polity/Political system	Societal community	Fiduciary system
Human action system	Behavioral system	Personality system	Social system	Cultural system
Human condition system	Physicochemical system	Organic system	Action system	Telic system

Parsons' systems theory may seem to be static however he has developed the dynamic model which each subsystem not only operating its own function but also relates with other subsystems.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7. and Richard Münch, "Parsons, Talcott", *Ibid.*, p. 551-552.

The inputs and outputs can be exchanged between subsystems.²⁷ This Parsons' model of double interchange is operated by generalized media of interchange (or communication).²⁸ There can be six sets of exchanges in social systems that are L-A, L-G, L-I, I-A, I-G, G-A.²⁹ In social system the media of exchange are (A) money, (G) power, (I) influence, (L) value commitments.³⁰ Figure 5 will show double interchange and Media of Exchange, the subsystem of social system, AGIL function.

Figure 5: Parsons' Media of Exchange, Subsystem and AGIL



The systems theory derived from Parsons can be created as a framework for understanding the function and subsystems of the social systems as well as its interrelation between subsystems with some media of exchange. In next section this approach will be applied to interpret the Tipiṅka.

Awakening Society: Interpretation

Buddhist scholars have introduced many forms of ideal society according to particular social context. Ven. Buddhadasa introduced 'Dhammic Socialism' society during the competing political ideology among socialism, democracy and authoritarianism in Thailand and South East Asia region. Moreover the increasing influence of materialism, consumerism and capitalism in economic and cultural system was also the underlining courses to the formation of 'Dhammic Socialism' society. Ven. Buddhadasa combined three political ideologies with Buddhism into one Dhammic Socialist Democracy with Authoritarian management style³¹ which Dhamma performs as the hearth, democracy as the mean, Socialism as the people's benefit and Authoritarianism as proactive management style. Ven. Buddhadasa mainly interested in Political and Economic subsystems and suggested morality as 'value commitments' in media of exchange to interrelate between subsystems.

²⁷ John Scott, "Talcott Parsons", *Fifty Key Sociologists: the Contemporary Theorists*, edited by John Scott, (London: Routledge, 2007), p.191.

²⁸ Richard Münch, "Parsons, Talcott", *Ibid.*, p. 552.

²⁹ Leon H. Mayhew, "Introduction", *Talcott Parsons on Institutions and Social Evolution*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), P.32.

³⁰ Richard Münch, "Parsons, Talcott", *Ibid.*, p. 552.

³¹ Buddhadasa, *Dhammic Socialism*, (Bangkok: Prayoonwong Printing, 1999), p. 80.

Ven. P.A. Payutto has also presented another form of ideal society which is the society of good friends³² or we probably call ‘Kalyāṅamittatā Society’. This ideal society was based on the influence of good friends or ‘Kalyāṅamittatā in order to socialize or educate individual and form right view (samādiṅṅhi). Human development and education system as a part of societal subsystem is the major concern in Ven. P.A. Payutto’s view. Therefore integration and latent pattern maintenance functions in societal community and fiduciary subsystems are the major focus. Paratoghosa or hearing from others (especially from Kalyāṅamittatā) is used as ‘influence’ in media of exchange between these subsystems. Ven. P.A. Payutto also emphasizes on the interdependent among multi levels of analysis from human, natural system and social system as metaphor to Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha respectively.

Now is it possible to interpret the concept of Buddhist ideal society in other ways and what will be the result?

The social context in present time is the clash between worldviews (diṅṅhi). It is between modern and post-modern paradigm, between globalization and localization, between war from the rich and terrorism from the poor etc. How can we initiate any ideal society as if people have different views to the mean and to the goal of the society?

Let’s start from the Tipiṅaka and perceive as if these cannons are the sociological evidence. In Aggaññasuttaṅ³³ the Buddha has preached the formation of the social system and its subsystem which started from the King as political system, the Brāhmaṅa as social community, the Vessa and Sudda as economic system and religious belief as judiciary system.

By using AGIL scheme and four action subsystems, what are the particular media of exchange between subsystems that the Buddha attempted to propagate? To answer this question may be possible to find out the Buddhist ideal society.

The Buddhist media of exchange

1) In adaptation function (A) and economic subsystem, the major task is to adapt to the external environment or adapt the environment to the system. In the modern period we adapt and sacrifice the environment to our social goal name as economic growth and that led to the global warming in this time. Like in Kūṅadantasuttaṅ,³⁴ wealthy Brāhmaṅa Kūṅadanta had wrong view in sacrifice animals, the Buddha led him to a new paradigm of sacrifice that is sharing to others or Dāna/Cāga principle. This may be meant that instead of adapting the environment to fulfill our system’s goal, we may have to adapt our systems to the environment by giving out more both inside our subsystems and to the outer environment. The key word for adaptation and economic system in media of exchange may be transferred from making ‘money’ into ‘sharing’ (Dāna/Cāga).

2) In goal attainment function (G) and political subsystem, the state ruler used to set up goals of the social system and mobilize resources both inside and outside the system to attain them. The media of exchange that uses to relate with others is ‘power’. This leads to the projection and competition of power starting from physical violence, structural violence to cultural violence. In Cakkavattisuttaṅ,³⁵ the Buddha has preached that the rulers need to be righteous or in the wholesome course of action (kusala-kammapha) and function to protect and care others. However if the ruler did not consult to ethic advisor or hermit for the wholesome course of action (kusala-kammapha), he then would do wrong through performing by his own idea. The key word for the ruler or political

³² Phra Warakorn Chayakaro (Poolsawat), “Analytical Study of Ideal Society in the Light of Phra Dhammapiṅaka (P.A. Payutto)”, **Thesis of Master of Arts (Philosophy)**, (Graduate School: Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 2001).

³³ PTS. D III, 80-98.

³⁴ PTS. D I, 126-149.

³⁵ PTS. D III, 55-79.

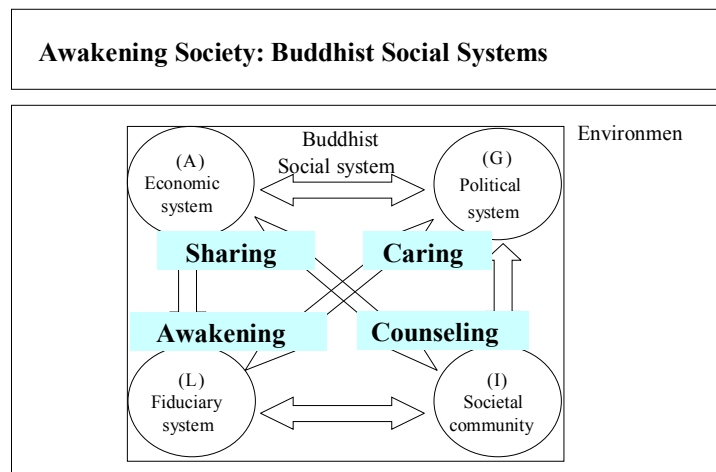
system is ‘kusala-kammapatha’ and for media of exchange is ‘caring’ or mettā/karuṇā (loving kindness and compassion).

3) In Integration function (I), societal community needs to manage the interrelationships of the subsystems and maintain internal coherence and solidarity within the social system. The media of exchange is ‘influence’. In the Tipiṭaka, the Vinayapiṭaka is full of course of training for disciples and rules for guideline of actions or the Pāṭimokkha. These are the examples to maintain internal coherence and make the religion last long as Sariputta had asked the Buddha to set up. However, what the Sangha community contributed to other subsystems as media of exchange is ‘counseling’ for ‘wisdom’ or as the contemporary concept calls ‘dialogue’. There are a lot of dialogues as examples in the Suttantapiṭaka.

4) For the Latent pattern maintenance function (L) and fiduciary or cultural system, the main task is to maintain the stability of the patterns of institutionalized culture defining the structure of the system.³⁶ The Buddha has started up new pattern that is Buddhism which contains different belief from others. While other religions propose value commitments such as to be part of god, heaven, peace from trance etc., the Buddha preached new belief system especially insight meditation (Vipassanā-bhāvanā) and so on. Therefore the media of exchange in Buddhist latent pattern maintenance and fiduciary system is ‘Awakening’ or Sati (mindfulness) as value commitments.

Figure 6 will summarize the Buddhist social systems as Awakening Society.

Figure 6: Awakening Society: Buddhist Social Systems



Conclusion:

This article is attempted to use Systems theory as a framework to interpret the Tipiṭaka and to find out some results as the Buddhist social system model. Social system is composed of general four-function scheme or AGIL that are Adaptation, Goal attainment, Integration and Latent pattern maintenance. These four functions perform with another four subsystems which are economic system, political system, societal community and fiduciary or cultural system. The interrelationship between each subsystem is called double interchange which exhibits and operates by generalized media of exchange. The media of exchange are Money, Power, Influence and Value commitments.

Awakening Society as Buddhist social system is not attached to any particular form of subsystems as these structures can be changed while the four functions are still perform. The media

³⁶ Talcott Parsons, Talcott Parsons on Institutions and Social Evolution, *Ibid.*, P.159.

of exchange which derived from the Tipiṭaka interpretation are significantly different from Parsons' systems theory. They are 'Sharing' instead of Money, 'Caring' instead of Power, 'Counseling' (hearing) instead of Influence and 'Awakening' compare to other Value commitments.

Although 'Awakening Society' as Buddhist social system is in the beginning of the development, it can provide some alternative perspectives for those who want to explain the society with the macro level of analysis.