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Buddhist Perspective on Politics [Public Lecture]

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Introduction

The Buddha had gone beyond all worldly affairs, but still advised on good government.

Since the time of Buddha, or even before, kings and politicians have aspired to become great emperors to rule the whole world. The Buddha never approved of any war. There is no such thing as a simple war in Buddhist thought. But, a leader can become a world ruler without war. As the Buddha agreed, the only power that can rule the world is the power of the virtuous (Dhamma). For him, a king who aspires to be a wheel-turning monarch (the Buddhist term for emperor) attains supremacy by virtue, not by force. Buddhism, based on an essential theory of morality, proposes a deflationary political theory of the importance of politics in human life.

Good governance and the ten royal virtues of the Dgha Nkya of the Pali Canon of Buddhism, Aggaa Sutta, Chakkavatti Shnada Sutta, and Kutadanta Sutta, are inextricably linked.

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Buddhism on Righteous Politics

Many canonical sources explain Buddhist political theory. One of them is AggaaSutta, which describes the origins of the earth and social order and explains the righteous political theory and how the kingship arose as a result of the noxious trio. This Sutta provides us with the leadership qualities that the early men are supposed to have expected of their leader. This king, whose title was mahāsammata, which the text argues means "*people's choice*," was the first khattiya, which the text argues means "*lord of the fields*." It is reported that they approached the "physically attractive, pleasant, and capable" (abhirūpataro, pāsādikataro, mahesakkataro) person and asked him to accept their leadership. In other words, they looked for a balanced person with commanding and pleasant qualities. Advice given to political leaders also provides more information on the leadership concept of Buddhists. The etymological definition given to the term 'rāja' i.e., 'Dhammena pare rañjatītirājā' meant that the king as the leader of the people should make people happy with noble policies. Any leader, for that matter, should keep his group happy with good policies.

Leaders should be morally integral and compassionate, and they must have a clear vision and mission. They should not abuse their leadership for self-glorification or personal gain. They must be good communicators and be able to represent the group as individuals who can speak on its behalf. MahāparinibbānaSutta is another major canonical source that appears to offer normative political guidance. There are passing comments about normative political theory in the Jātaka texts and parables about the previous incarnations of the Buddha. In many places, they list a series of duties to be observed by kings or by the leaders of governments who would be righteous. The duties are:

Charity (Dana)

The ruler should give up one's personal pleasure to protect the common good by giving away one's belongings or other things to support or assist others. In the modern context, one of the prime duties of elected leaders would be to provide economic security.

High moral character (Sila)

It is related to the observation of five principles: "not to destroy life," "not to steal," "not to commit adultery," "not to tell lies," and "not to take intoxicating drinks", known as moral obligations. The qualities that are essential for winning the respect and trust of the people According to Buddha's teaching, adherence to these characteristics helps to eradicate maladministration, violence, indiscipline, etc. in the country.

- **Generosity (Pariccga):** The practice of avoiding selfishness and sacrificing everything for the common good by giving gifts.
- **Honesty and Integrity (Ajjava):** He must be free from fear and favouritism while discharging his duties and must not betray the public.

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- **Kindness and gentleness (Tapa):** The ruler must lead a simple life without flouting discipline, i.e., control of emotion and desires, and refrain from a life of luxury and anger (akkodha) to become a good ruler.
- **Refraining from causing harm to anyone (Akkodha):** He should bear no hatred toward anybody and remain calm.
- **Non-violence (Ahimsa):** He should not harm anyone, maintain an attitude of kindness, and try to promote maintaining peace.
- **Patience and tolerance (Khanti):** He must be able to exercise patience and be able to bear insult and trembling to serve the common good.
- **Non-opposition and obstruction (Aviordha):** He should not oppose the will of the people and rule the country in harmony with them. These qualities are essential in every sector. These characteristics contribute to the advancement of the country and the community. Any deviation from this condition requires joining the vibrant public sphere of civil society, where they can participate in public issues with different perspectives, seek optimal resolution of knotty problems, and blend local insights and social sciences to guide public policies. With the separation of one from the other, political actions can be taken to benefit one group while depriving others.

Five Kinds of Possessiveness Affect a Harmonious Society

Possessiveness in a locality or country

If a locality or country is filled with this kind of attachment, nationalism will arise. This possessiveness connects with the desire for a country to dominate, to have hegemony over or superiority over another territory.

Possessiveness within a clan or ethnicity

This attachment makes people think about their race, color, and ethnicity. Knowingly or otherwise, it creates discrimination or even genocide.

Possessiveness in material wealth

Capitalism allows people to accumulate wealth without limit, representing this kind of attachment to material wealth. Any part of the planet is well aware of its dangers and adverse consequences, especially the alarming gap between the rich and the poor, both within a country and among many countries.

Possessiveness in social class or caste

The idea of "class struggle" originated from this kind of possessiveness. It can be applied to any kind of social grouping, including a political one. There are plenty of examples in *Journal of Political Science, Vol. 23, February 2023 [124-130]*

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politics. Instead of righteousness and the benefit of the people, politicians vote for their own political party's policies no matter how bad they are and against the ideas of the rival party, even though they might be good.

Possessiveness in knowledge, information, and intellectual achievement

According to Buddhist Guidelines for Righteous Politics, if politics' goal is to enable a large number of people to live peacefully together, it will fail as long as its members cannot overcome their attachment to their own interests, deprivation of others, and manipulation of politics. Political power was centered on the ruling elites during the Buddha's time. The individual character of the leader is important to the welfare of the state. As a result, he spent a lot of time teaching people how to be good leaders. One of the suggestions is that the ruler must consult with his ministries, wise men, and religious teachers to cultivate compassion and wisdom.

Buddhism as a Governing System

Buddhism, a unique feature, is a "doctrine of human beings, by human beings, and for human beings." Buddhism is a system born of a fully developed and enlightened human mind, one for the betterment of mankind, and one that will endure as long as its observers choose to follow its path. Buddhism is a religion that is primarily concerned with human behavior, how people behave in their daily activities, and the choices they make.

Coming from a royal family, the Buddha did not directly establish a political system but wanted the ruler to be a virtuous ruler with power and purity. In Buddha's time, the monarchy was the primary political system, with the monarch at the helm. The Buddha did not try to change things regarding the political system, but the absolute monarch in charge of the subjects of his or her kingdom should protect them through righteous Dhamma. He pointed out that a non-violent and compassionate sovereign would protect the people and guide them to a peaceful and prosperous life.

Buddhist Ideals of Good Governance

"Buddhism as a governing system." There were monarchical and republican forms of government during the Buddha's time, but the Buddha did not specify a single system as the best; it explains the concept of a ruler within the Buddhist context. Some of the discourses of the Buddha provide us with detailed accounts of the evolution of human society, the state, and kingship.

It is evident, however, that the Buddhist approach is different from the prevailing Brahmanic tradition in India. Brahmins, more often than not, intermingled these institutions with a theistic bias. Buddhism, on the other hand, not relying on an all-powerful creator, traces the evolution of human society along with statehood and kingship without any reference to the intervention of a creator god. The *Agganna*, *CakkavattiSihanada*, and *KutadantaSuttas* of the *DighaNikaya* of the Pali Canon are of special importance in this

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connection, as mentioned by Gunaratna. The Buddha discussed the causes of social problems and crises in ChakkavattiShnadaSutta. When poverty prevails, people resort to various vices. Note that theft, deceit, violence, hatred, and cruelty can spring from poverty. In this regard, the Buddha states in DghaNkya: "If His/Her Majesty is going to tax this area, He/She is wrong." Suppose His Majesty thought: "By execution and imprisonment, or confiscation, intimidation, and expulsion, we will eliminate this plague of bandits." Those who survive will later wreak havoc in His Majesty's realm. Let His Majesty distribute corn and fodder to those in the kingdom who plant corn and raise cattle. Give capital to those who trade. Allocate adequate living wages to civil servants. Then these people will take care of their occupations and will not harm the kingdom. Your Majesty's income will be great, the land will be quiet, thieves will not trample on it, and the people will have children. Play with them, live in an open house, and have a happy heart, as described by Wallace in his book. This is a fine example of the good governance realized by the Buddha. Buddhism gives a clear idea of the effective management system and the nature of the country concerning the behavior of the ruler.

The Vajjians were given seven conditions of rules by Buddha on how to preserve and continue the progress of the people while avoiding loss of wealth, known as SattaAparihaniya Dharma. Bhikkus are instructed to hold many meetings or assemblies frequently and regularly with good faith and open hearts; as long as they hold regular meetings, it promotes unity among them and allows them to perform their discharge functions efficiently. And, instead of introducing bad policies and regulations into any organization or state, follow the rules and regulations; Honoring and respecting elderly Bhikkhus and senior citizens promotes a beautiful life; respecting and admiring the females, protecting them from misconduct and ill-treatment, and protecting their rights; preserving, honouring, and worshipping all the religious locations, shrines, and monasteries at home and abroad. It brings harmony among diverse ethnic and religious communities. Lastly, providing rightful protection and defence, guarding the Arahants (sanctuary monks), and arranging the well-being of the new Arahants The Buddha said that adherents to these principles of unity and good governance increase trust in the government, and no one can defeat the Vajrayanas as long as they follow these principles. These principles are quite useful, for the prosperity of the nation and communities, even today.

As a result, Buddha promoted deep reflective thought and a democratic process. This is evident within the community of the order, where all members have the right to decide on general issues. It was discussed like that of the democratic parliamentary system. This process of self-government may come as a surprise to many when they learn that the beginnings of current parliamentary practices can be seen in Buddhist congregations from many years ago. A "speaker" was appointed to protect the dignity of the Speaker of Parliament and ensure a quorum. The issue was presented in the form of a motion for discussion. Sometimes he did this once, sometimes three times, in anticipation of Congress' practice of requiring a third hearing before a bill was enacted. If the discussion resulted in disagreements, these were to be resolved by a majority vote.

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The Buddhist approach to political power is the moral and responsible use of public power. Buddha preached non-violence and peace as a universal message and discouraged violence or any type of destruction of life, declaring that there is no such thing as a "just" war. "Winners breed hatred; losers live in Winners," he taught. Those who renounce victory and defeat are happy and peaceful. He was the first and only religious teacher to go to the battlefield to prevent the outbreak. He diffused tension between the Sakyas and the Koliyas, who were about to wage war over the waters of Rohini. He also dissuaded King Ajatasattu from attacking the Kingdom of the Vajjis.

The Buddha discussed the importance of a good government and showed how the country could become corrupt, degenerate, and unhappy when the head of the government becomes corrupt and unjust. He spoke against corruption and how a government should act based on humanitarian principles. AnguttaraNikaya Buddha states that

When the ruler of a country is just and good, the ministers become just and good; when the ministers are just and good, the higher officials become just and good; when the higher officials are just and good, the rank and file become just and good; when the rank and file become just and good, the people become just and good.

Eightfold Path and Good Government

Another important aspect of Buddhist philosophy is to end suffering or wrong views in life and provide a medium to achieve self-enlightenment. This is because many factors contribute to suffering. It consists of the Noble Eightfold Path, a tool that changes your mind and helps you become a better ruler, known as the Dharmachakra, which consists of eight practices. These can be divided into threefold headings of Buddha's teaching: wisdom (right view and right intention), ethical conduct (right speech, right action, and right livelihood), and meditation (right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration). These eight categories of paths are the tools for empowering people, they should be followed and practised one after another. Out of these, three—right speech, right action, and right livelihood—guide our ethical code of conduct and are interrelated. It is a leading path to achieving happiness and peace. Buddha's eightfold teaching is for 'the good of many and for the happiness of many' and is relevant to contemporary Nepal.

Emperor Asoka as an Example

The Buddha's emphasis on the moral duty of a ruler to use public power to improve the welfare of the people had inspired Emperor Asoka in the Third Century B.C. to do likewise. Emperor Asoka, a sparkling example of this principle, resolved to live according to and preach the Dhamma and to serve his subjects and all humanity. He declared his non-aggressive intentions to his neighbours, assuring them of his goodwill and sending envoys to distant kings bearing his message of peace and non-aggression. He promoted the energetic practice of the socio-moral virtues of honesty, truthfulness, compassion, benevolence, non-violence, considerate behaviour towards all, non-extravagance, non-acquisitiveness, and non-injury to animals. He encouraged religious freedom and mutual respect's creed. He went

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on periodic tours, preaching the Dhamma to the rural people. He undertook works of public utility, such as the foundation of hospitals for men and animals, supplying medicine, planting roadside trees and groves, digging wells, and constructing watering sheds and rest houses. He expressly forbade cruelty to animals.

Conclusion

All of the discourses in the Digha Nkya's Aggaa Sutta, Chakkavatti Shnada Sutta, and Kutadanta Sutta reiterate the fact that political authority is only valid based on two factors:

- The common consent of the people
- The adherence to righteousness

The Buddha is a social reformer. Among other things, he condemned the caste system, recognized the equality of people, spoke on the need to improve socio-economic conditions, recognized the importance of a more equitable distribution of wealth among the rich and the poor, raised the status of women, recommended the incorporation of humanism in government and administration, and taught that a society should not be run by greed but with consideration and compassion for the people.

In the end, Buddhism does not present a particular political system for governing nations but rather requires rulers to be just and ethical. All guidelines are provided for rulers to rule well and avoid thoughts and actions that are harmful to their people and kingdoms.