
Dhamma: The Attributes and Virtues of Kingship

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Abstract

The contribution of Buddhism to Indian thought has been quite significant. In the time of the Buddha there existed two types of Governments namely monarchical and republican or oligarchic. There are many suttas that discuss the origin of kingship and explain the practices and norms that should be followed by a virtuous ruler. The Jatakas make reference to ten norms a king has to follow as well as the right of the people to expel king who are not suitable. The duties of the ideal king namely, the Cakkavatti Raja are explained in the Cakkavatthisihanada Sutta. There in both the internal and external policies of such an ideal ruler are discussed. The fundamental features of these norms are protection and maintenance of all, including birds and beasts in the kingdom, eradication of all forms of corruption, securing economic stability and progress and sustaining men. How a king observance of Dhamma instead of its reverse benefits himself is told in a few stories. How a king who conquered wrath with mildness and badness with goodness and the bad with badness, and how kings allowed themselves to be captured and ill-treated by neighbouring kings only to gain back their freedom and their kingdom through their inherent goodness. The Paper will discuss all such issues in traditional and literary context.

Introduction

The Buddha has been considered to be a philosopher and an ethical teacher. He was not preoccupied with political or state-related issues, in contrast to that, many recent scholars have analysed from the historical context of the Buddha's life that he was both a social reformer and political thinker. Monarchical states or kingdoms were conceivably numerous in Jambudvīpa (Ancient India) and earned considerable reputations historically. *Dhamma* means righteousness and includes such traits as equity and impartiality. The Buddha discredited the theory of divine origin and knew the basic, common origin of all living beings barring plants. A true, righteous monarch should understand the equality of his subjects. Seeing the equality of all of his subjects, a true monarch would rule them impartially. On the Buddhist concept of kingship, there exists much information. Besides describing the king as a public refuge (*patisaranam*), the king should possess both virtue (*śīla*) and wisdom, or intellect (*pañña*) to understand and discriminate between good and evil statements¹. The king is empowered by five strengths, as follows: Physical strength or power-agility and muscular strength, as applied in governance and warfare. Material strength-wealth and material resources, Strength of court officials, providing they are united behind him and know and perform their

¹ *Siddhi Butr-Indr*, 1995; p.147

respective duties, strength of nobility, wisdom or intellect.

Two types of Governments

In the time of the Buddha there existed two types of Governments namely monarchical and republican or oligarchic². The *Aggañña sutta*³ discusses the origin of kingship and explains the practices and norms that should be followed by a virtuous ruler⁴. Early Buddhist canonical text refer also to such issues as ethics, punishment, environmental protection, administration of justice in so far as they are related to political administration. The *Jātakas*⁵ make reference to ten norms a king has to follow as well as the right of the people to expel king who are not suitable. The *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*⁶ records that it is the Buddha who enunciated the seven conditions of progress to Vajjis when he was so journeying at a shrine called Sarandada. with reference to the invincibility of the Vajjis the Buddha said that as long as they observed these seven condition of progress one could expect only their success and not their decline. Unity, democracy, justice, impartiality, rule of law, respect for and obedience to elders and religious men, observance of customs and religious practices are some of the main features that are embodied in these seven conditions of progress.

Righteousness (Dhamma) of the Ideal King

The duties of the ideal king namely, the Cakkavatti Raja (Universal Monarch) are explained in the *Cakkavattisihanada Sutta*

.Therein both the internal and external policies of such an ideal ruler are discussed. The fundamental features of these norms are protection and maintenance of all including birds and beasts in the kingdom, eradication of all forms of corruption, securing economic stability and progress and sustaining men.⁷ This sutta emphasized righteousness (Dhamma) as the corner stone of a cakkavatti-rulership. Even *Dhammaraja-sutta*⁸ points out that Dhamma is the lord or the ruler of even a cakkavatti-rajā. Explaining what is meant by Dhamma in this context K.N. Jayatilleke⁹ says this is not to be interpreted to mean that Dhamma is some sort of mysterious entity but that is only to the extent to which states conform with Dhamma in their internal and foreign policy that man can achieve his legitimate aspirations for peace, prosperity and happiness.”

Several Jatakas stories describe king who are said to have ruled in righteousness, shunned the four wrong courses of life (comprising excitement, malice, delusion and fear), practised the ten royal duties (*rajadhamma*) (namely, alms-giving, morality, liberality, straightforwardness, refraining from anger and from injury, forbearance and refraining from opposition), won over the people by the four elements of popularity (namely, liberality, affability, beneficent rule and impartiality) and were zealous in the observance of the fast-day and keeping the ten items of good behaviour (*śīla*), namely, abstinence from taking life, from taking what is not given to one, from adultery, from telling lies, from slander, from harsh speech, from frivolous talks, from covetousness, from malevolence, and from

² T.W.Rhys Davids, *Buddhist Logic*, 1950, p.1

³ *Digha Nikaya*, III. P. 80 ff.

⁴ *Anguttara Nikaya* I. 109

⁵ G.S.P. Misra, *Development of Buddhist Ethics*, New Delhi, 1964, p.110

⁶ *Digha Nikaya*, II. PP 73,74.

⁷ *Digha Nikaya*, III. P. 61.

⁸ *Anguttara Nikaya* III. P.149.

⁹ K.N. Jayatilleke, *The Principles of International law in Buddhist Doctrine*, p.478.

heretical views.¹⁰ How a king observance of Dhamma instead of its reverse benefits himself is told in a few stories. How a king who conquered wrath with mildness and badness with goodness and the bad with badness, and how kings allowed themselves to be captured and ill-treated by neighbouring kings only to gain back their freedom and their kingdom through their inherent goodness. Several Jātaka stories told that dhamma is the essence of kingship as well as the king's best policy.

Nature and Virtues of Good Monarch

According to Buddhadhamma, or Buddhasatsana, a true, good monarch is or should be endowed with the following ten virtues:

- As it is incumbent of the monarch to ensure the welfare and prosperity of his people, the first of these virtues is *dana* or charity. In Buddhism, *dana* includes generosity and reward. It is incumbent for a good leader to give freely from his resources to anyone who needs anything.
- The second virtue, very typically, was *śīla* or morality. The *raja* is himself a lay follower and lay followers were expected to follow only five principles of moral conduct, whereas the *bhikkus* had many more.
- *pariccaga* (self-sacrifice for common good):¹¹ claims that this included the sacrifice of life and limbs on behalf of the people, which is a very grand and noble gesture for anyone and therefore very scarce. It arises from the belief that the happiness of others

causes oneself to feel happy, which is true.

- *ajjava* (honesty): this virtue encompasses sincerity and freedom from fear (*bhayamokka*) while discharging royal duties. It is very conceivable that any honest man or woman, regardless of birthright, should have no cause to fear so long as his/her activity is honest and sincere. Thus, a king who lives honestly and sincerely need not fear any loss to himself; or his family. To highlight this, the *Sigalovada Sutta, Digha Nikaya*, adds: “*Canda dosa bhaya moha—yo dhammam nativattati. Apurati tassa yaso—Sukkha pakheva candima*”. (If a person maintains justice without being subjected to favouritism, hatred, fear or ignorance, his popularity grows like the waxing moon).
- *maddava* (gentleness) includes politeness and friendliness.
- *tapa* (austerity) is generally a quality of ascetics and therefore uncommon in men of high birth and status in society.
- *akkodha* is good will. It is also translated as ‘non-hatred.’ Thus, a ruler should not bear any grudge against anyone. Furthermore, he should act with love and forbearance.
- *ahimsa* (non-violence): Buddha taught non-violence even in the case of war, although he was well aware that war was difficult to avoid. He included the promotion of peace through non-violent action, which is truly the only way to peace. This virtue was best epitomised in Emperor Asoka.
- *khanti*, or patience. The ruler is herein urged to bear all hardships without losing his temper and

¹⁰ Ghosal, U.N., *A History of Indian political ideas*, p.69.

¹¹ *Sidhhi Butr-Indr* 1995; p.150.

should avoid yielding to his emotions.

- *avirodha* (non-opposition to the public demand). This includes a commitment to public welfare and is a good twin to *pariccaga*. As a good monarch will first deem the welfare and happiness of the people as his own and then undertake to promote it.¹²

Discusses the nature of a good king along these lines, and historically there were god examples such as Maha Sudassana and Asoka. Maha Sudassana practiced *dāna* in the manner described; Asoka practiced *dāna*, *śīla* and *ahimsa* and originated many institutions in his kingdom to promote the public welfare. He stands as one of the best examples of a monarch in early history. However, while the leader who possesses all of three virtues is loved well, he is very rare. Some kings or leaders have possessed only a few virtues and others have abused wealth and power for self-interest.

The king it is explained, should avoid specified vices and practise specified virtues. According to the *Anguttara Nikāya*, when kings become unrighteous their officers (*rajayuttas*) also become unrighteous. “This being so the Brahmanas and the mass of ordinary freemen (*gahapatis*), the townfolk and the villagers in their turn become unrighteous; this being so the sun and the moon, the stars and the constellations go wrong in their courses; days and nights, months, seasons and years are out of joint; the winds blow wrong; the devas being annoyed do not bestow sufficient rain. This being so, the crops ripen in the wrong season and consequently men are short-lived, ill-favoured, weak and sickly. Conversely, when kings become righteous, all the reverse consequences follow.”¹³ In the

¹² Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* 84-85

¹³ *Ibid.*

Suvarnaprābhāsa sūtta we read that the king is divinely ordained instrument for the fulfilment of dhamma. This is made to supplement the old familiar principle that dhamma is the attributes and virtues of kingship and is in fact the king’s foremost obligation.

The *Aggañña sūtta* give a causal explanation of the origin of Kingship, rejecting the view that it is divine origin. This sutta also mention that the Kingship was conferred by public consent and this is corroborated by the *Cakkavattisihanada Sutta*¹⁴, which clearly mentions that kinship is not paternal legacy. Prof. Kalupahana¹⁵ points out that this fact further strengthens the concept of social contract. In obtaining the kingship as well as in accepting and carrying out administration it is the will of the people that plays a pivotal role. *Cakkavattisihanada Sutta*¹⁶ clearly describes the dire consequences that befall upon a country that is being ruled by an autocratic king. The *Kutadanta sūtta*¹⁷ stressed the fact that a just ruler should primarily be concerned not about his own well being but almost the well being of the subjects. It also shows how important it is to obtain public consent when implementing programmes affecting them. Several suttas explain how even nature turns out to be adverse as a result of bad governance. This fact is very clearly explained in the *Adhammika sutta* of the *Anguttaranikaya*¹⁸, this sutta illustrates how, when the ruler is corrupt, different strata of society gets corrupted, and how nature is affected by this process of corruption, which in turn adversely affected by this process of corruption,

¹⁴ *Digha Nikaya*, III. P. 61.

¹⁵ D.J. Kalupahana, *Buddha’s Social and Political Philosophy*, in *A.C.B.C. Diamond Jubilee*, 1980, p.34.

¹⁶ *Digha Nikaya*, III. P. 64.

¹⁷ *Digha Nikaya*, I. P. 135

¹⁸ *Anguttara Nikaya* II, P.74.

which in turn adversely affects the people. The modern societies have had enough such experiences.

Relation between Politics and Virtues

The relation between politics and virtues has been well explained in both the *Cakkavattisihanada Sutta* and the *Kutadanta sūta*. The former describes how unrest and consequent terrorism arise due to misgovernment of a ruler who does not pay enough attention to the people's welfare. The latter shows its contrary by depicting a society that becomes peaceful and affluent due to good government of a ruler who provides economic security to the people. The king is not considered as a mere ruler. On the one hand he should abide by the advice of the wise and carry out policies for long lasting well being of his subjects, on the other he also should abide by the advice of the wise and carry out policies for long lasting well being of his subjects, on the other he also should be capable of advising the people. In fact it is the duty of a ruler to educate the subjects.¹⁹ In the present this could be done through education, and then the provision of education to the people becomes the responsibility of the state. The texts also make it clear the system of education should not be limited to imparting only academic and professional skill, but should also be geared to the promotion of moral and ethical knowledge. It appears that the main aim of should be not teaching of a particular religious belief, but the moulding of good citizen. This in other words, means it should be aimed at creating a society where at least there would be safety of life, of private property, of family life, proper and unhindered communication and also where life could be led properly without falling into intoxication and going astray.

¹⁹Kalupahana, op.cit. p.34

Debate on Buddha's preference of state has occurred. As we have mentioned earlier, evidence exists that Buddha emphasises the saṅgha or 'tribal republic' such as Vajja. In his fourth sermon to Ananda bhikku and Vasakara the Chaplain of King Ajatasatru, Buddha mentioned that tribal unity was a vital criterion for the survival of the state. Most scholars of Asoka's dharma accord it as an ethical code. Beside the foundation of hospitals, inns and rest homes, arboretums [parks established for the planting and nurturing of plants and trees] and so on, Asoka preached social equity and sectarian equality. He declared that he was impartial to any sect of his time but his edict warned his subjects against showing prejudice or hatred towards other sects. At the core of his dhamma, like that of Buddha, was *sila* or conduct. Even today, it is still easy "to fall into evil ways" and the highly-placed—i.e., public and private administrators, etc—especially cannot always behave properly. (Mahesh Tiwari, 1989; p.159).

Importance of a Good Government

The Buddha discussed the importance and the prerequisites of a good government. He 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 on humanitarian principles. The Buddha once said, "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."

In the *Cakkamatti Sihananda Sutta*, the Buddha said that immorality and crime, such as theft, falsehood, violence, hatred, cruelty, could arise from poverty. Kings and government may try to suppress crime through punishment, but it is futile to eradicate crimes through force. The Buddha's emphasis is on the moral duty of a ruler to use public power to improve the welfare of the people had inspired Emperor Asoka, a sparkling example of this principle, resolved to live and preach the Dhamma and to serve his subjects and all humanity accordingly. 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 for each other's creed. He went on to periodic tours preaching the *Dhamma* to the rural people. He undertook works of public utility, such as founding of hospitals for man beings and animals, supplying of medicine, plantation of the roadside trees and groves, digging of

wells, and construction of watering sheds and rest houses. He expressly forbade cruelty to animals.

Conclusion

In conclusion we may say that the ruler is considered as the centre of the society. Everybody has to follow him as the leader. He is the model for common people and the virtues to be developed by the ruler and his subordinates to be the good model of people. The staff and all officials of the ruler should be men of wisdom and virtue. The economic glory and prosperity and spiritual peace of the people and the state should be taken care of strictly by the ruler. It is supposed to be the symbol of the well-being of the people. A good ruler is beloved and popular among the domestic as well as the monastic inhabitants: just as a father is near and dear to his children, even so is the ruler beloved and regarded by the ruled; and just as the children are near and dare to their father, even so are the ruled to a ruler. A good ruler sets his whole heart upon promoting the welfare of his people and makes righteousness the sole purpose of his actions.