

THE BUDDHIST TEACHINGS ON GOOD GOVERNANCE

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Abstract- *This paper basically discusses the Buddhist notion on good governance and its relevance for current political system in Sri Lanka. Due to political imbalance and corruption in politics, the world has become confusion. It seems that the polluted political leadership has spread everywhere in Sri Lanka. Buddhism understands the politics as one of the constraints in society. But it does not escape from all the ties of mundane and secular living. The Buddhist canonical scriptures explain how the Buddha had encounters with the kings, ministers and rulers. The Buddha offered a number of sound principles relating to the good governance. Therefore, it is expected to revisit the importance of the Buddhist political teachings as a solution for the current political imbalance in the country. Buddhism encourages towards the ethical culmination into the political life. So that Buddhism is totally differentiated from the Kautilyan and Machiavellian political thoughts of governance. Buddhism introduces the concept of the Wheel Turning Monarch for good governance with the just and righteous principles (rājā cakkavattī dhammiko dhammarājā). He is understood as the culmination of morality in Buddhism. He is understood as the culmination of morality in Buddhism. The sutta-s like Aggañña, Chakkavattisihanāda, Kūṭadanta, Mahāparinibbāna, Adhammika, Dhanañjāni and Middle Path speak of the concept of good governance in Buddhism. From the Buddhist perspective, the ruler is traditionally recognized as a Boddhisattva. He is said to be possessed the qualities like compassion, tolerance and gentleness. If the king is ethical, the whole country rests happily. Buddhism suggests that the corrupted governance brings bad consequences not for the entire social institution but for natural process.*

Key Words: *Dhamma, Good Governance, Sri Lanka*

INTRODUCTION

In Buddhism, there are no certain books which are solely concerned on the politics. But it presents wide-ranging matters on relating the political life of the world. Buddhist stories on the principles of politics sometimes present information in the form of myth, fiction and allegorical stories. Those stories guide for the basic principles necessary for a system of good governance. The principles that revealed by the Buddhist stories with regard to the political life are extremely significant and meaningful to lead a good political life. Buddhism always deals with the ideas of just, goodness and righteousness. Today we, all, see all over the world that the downfall of the political powers with regard to good governance. The widening gap between haves and have-nots, trafficking drugs at large scale, the spread of prostitution, disregarding human rights, the spread of weapons, killing, theft and social unrest are prevalent throughout the world. Same situation can probably be found even in the Sri Lankan context. In the Buddhist political philosophy, it is viewed that to enhance the standards of high moral behavior in every corner of human activity. Buddhism admires using the extremely significant and meaningful ethical principles for political life.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

Buddhist teaching prescribes both the state and citizens for their behavior towards good governance. In Sri Lanka currently the state and its representation do not satisfy the expectations of the citizens. Therefore, reviewing the significance of Buddhist insights in the contest of good governance of Sri Lanka is important.

METHODOLOGY

The data for this research has been collected from the primary Buddhist sources and the relevant

monographs, and the articles written related to the field.

DISCUSSION

From the Buddhist perspective, a state is not given by the divine power. But a state is measured in the sense of divine. The Buddhist Genesis story (*the Aggaññasutta*) conveys us that the king was elected by the common people (*mahājanena sammato*). Buddhist tradition recognizes the ruler as a *Bodhisatta*. The term *Bodhisatta* is used the person who wishes to become a Buddha where he fulfills various spiritual qualities like compassion, tolerance and gentleness. Buddhism uses the term *rājā* in the sense of the king with the ethical meaning. The king is called as *rājā* because he delights the masses with a just and righteous way of ruling (*dhammena janam rañjetīti rājā*). The ruler is a person who should fulfill these qualities such as handsome (*abhirūpo*), good to be seen (*dassanīyo*), blessed (*pāsādiko*), and competence (*mahesakkho*). The physical quality of the kingship is also important. Therefore, the most capable person can be the king. Except these qualities, the person who wishes to become a ruler should be mastered on various knowledge. At the same time, he should be penetrating knowledge, knowledgeable, intelligent, be able to see what happened and what is happening, and what will be happen (The *Aṅguttaranikāya* V). Buddhism introduces for good governance the concept of the Wheel Turning Monarch consisting with the just and righteous principles (*rājā cakkavattī dhammiko dhammarājā*). The nature of the Wheel Turning Monarch is discussed in the well-known *Cakkavattisihanādasutta*. Therefore, Buddhist doctrines are of the opinion of a democratic and republican type of governance. From the Buddhist perspective *aggression, war and violence* were totally denial under the principles of good governance. Buddhism proposed the novel idea of a just and ethical universal ruler. He was named as a Wheel Turning Monarch. He rules without resorting to violence and without using weapons of war but becoming victorious solely based on the principles of *Dhamma (adaṇḍena asatthena dhammena abhivijaya)*. The Wheel Turning Monarch rules the earth to the borders of the ocean by means of righteousness without resorting to the force of arms and violence and establishes a political order for the material or secular welfare of all living beings. There are eight principles that commonly accepted as

constituting principles of good governance in the modern world. They are enumerated as follows:

1. Participation
2. Adherence to the rule of law
3. Transparency
4. Responsiveness
5. Consensus Orientation
6. Equity & Inclusiveness
7. Effectiveness & Efficiency
8. Accountability

This presents the story of a Wheel Turning Monarch. This monarch after ruling his realm for long time, decided to retire from the kingship handing over authority to his eldest son. The monarch had the seven treasures such as wheel, horse, elephant, woman, gem, ministers. The disappearance of the wheel treasures symbolized the fall of the ruler in respect of his power and authority. This happens due to the fact that negligence of his duties. As reported in this particular *sutta*, after the king handed over authority to his son, within a week, the Wheel Treasure disappeared. The newly appointed king could not continue his duties and he was disturbed in many ways. He made inquires to his father. The latter points out to the king that kingship is not a paternal inheritance of his. It is in so far as he fulfills the noble duties of a Wheel Turning Monarch that the wheel treasure remains in place. What are the noble duties of a Wheel Turning Monarch as recorded in the *sutta*.

“My son, depending on *Dhamma* itself, honouring *Dhamma*, esteeming *Dhamma*, worshipping *Dhamma*, venerating *Dhamma*, having *Dhamma* as the flag, having *Dhamma* as the banner, having *Dhamma* as the authority, you should provide righteous watch, ward and protection to people in the royal household, the troops, those of the ruling class, and other subjects who are Brahmins, householders of the townships and provinces, to renunciants and Brahmins and to beasts and birds. Let there be not within your territory one who acts in an unethical manner. Whoever in your

territory may be poor, grant them wealth. Whoever in your territory are renunciants and Brahmins that refrain from intoxication and heedlessness, established in patience and gentleness - some who discipline themselves, some who call themselves, some who bring themselves to appeasement- go to them from time to time and ask them and question them: 'What sir, is wholesome, what is unwholesome, what is blameworthy, what is blameless, what should be practised, what should not be practised, and my doing what will conduce to my harm and suffering for a long time, and doing what will conduce to my well-being and happiness for a long time?' Having heard from them, whatever is unwholesome, you should especially avoid it, and whatever is wholesome, you should observe and live by it. This, my son, is the noble duty of a Wheel Turner."

This *sutta* concludes the following ethical aspects of the ruler.

- ❖ He rules without resorting to violence and without weapons of war but becoming victorious solely based on the teachings of the *Dhamma*.
- ❖ Affirmation of safety of lives human beings and other beings.
- ❖ Assertion of economics stability
- ❖ Getting advices from the wises and intellectuals.
- ❖ He is ready to give up his power in proper time.

What Prof. K. N. Jayatilleke says in this regard is extremely important. For him *while any form of government would be good to the extent to which it follows the principles of the Buddhist political Dhamma*.

In the *Mahāparinibbāna sutta*, the Buddha speaks highly of the *Vajjian* state which followed on a body of elders not in a single individual. He points out to seven principles they firmly upheld resulting in establishing the strength and stability of the state. These principles were the most democratic procedure they adopted in making

vital decisions relating to state policy and administrative matters. The *Adhammikasutta* of the *Āṅguttaranikāya* discusses how the corrupt governance brings adverse consequences not only on the entire social order but also on nature and the physical environment. The following canonical passage runs:

"Monks, at a time the kings are unethical, the royal servicemen become unethical. When the royal servicemen become unethical, the Brahmin householders become unethical. When the Brahmin householders become unethical, those in the townships and provinces become unethical. When the townships and provinces become unethical, the moon and sun move unevenly. When the moon and sun move unevenly, the stars and the constellations move unevenly. When the stars and constellations move unevenly, then the night and day occur unevenly. When the night and day occur unevenly, the fortnights and months become uneven. When the fortnights and months become uneven, winds blow unevenly and in the wrong direction. When winds blow unevenly and in the wrong directions, deities become disturbed. When the deities become disturbed, the sky does not bring proper rainfall. When there is no proper rainfall, the grains ripen unevenly. When humans eat unevenly ripened grains, their life span is shortened, and they lose their beauty and power and are struck by many ailments. Monks, at a time the kings are ethical (*the opposite to the above happens*)." When cattle are crossing a (water way), if the leading bull goes crooked, all of them go crooked as the leading one has gone crooked. Even so, among humans, if one considered the chief behaves unethically, the rest will follow suit. If the king is unethical, the whole country rests unhappily. When cattle are crossing a (water way), if the leading bull goes straight, all of them go straight as the leading one has gone straight. Even so, among humans, if one considered the chief, indeed conducts oneself ethically all the rest follow suit. If the king is ethical, the whole country rests happily."

The good kings avoid the four courses of action that involve the violation of the principles of equity and justice in the activity of governance leading to serious violation of the rights of the citizens. Here, the practice of Middle Path (*majjhimā paṭipadā*) is quite important that rejects the two extremes. The four courses of action described in the Buddhist tradition came to be known as *agati-gamana*. Buddhism introduces Four Grounds of Benevolence (*saṅgahavatthu*) and Ten Principles of Good Governance (*dasarājadhamma*) further with regard to good governance. For Buddhism "*the Wheel of Power turns in dependence on the Wheel of Justice*" (*balacakkram hi nisraya dharmacakkram pravartate*).

The Buddhist king Asoka of 3rd century B. C. E. India provides us with the ideal example of a ruler who tried to implement Buddhist principles of good governance in his empire. His aspiration was to become a Wheel Turning Monarch, a spiritual ruler of the earth not by physical might but by moral and spiritual power. The historian *H. G. Wells* refers to Asoka as the greatest ruler that the world had ever witnessed. All the rock and pillar inscriptions of Asoka show that his was a really practical and serious attempt to establish a political order based on Buddhist doctrines. He turned to the Buddhist political philosophy of *Dhamma Vijaya* and instructed numerous administrative arrangements for achieving that goal. In his *Kālinga* Rock Edict II, he says:

"All men are my offspring. Just as for my offspring I desire that they may be united with all welfare and happiness of this world and of the next, precisely do I desire it for all men."

One of the most remarkable examples of Asoka's tolerance of all religious faiths and his promotion of the essentials of the moral teachings can be found in his Rock Edict XII.

CONCLUSION

What we have discussed earlier can be applied to the Sri Lankan political arena where we can see a stable country. If any ruler violates the conditions they had agreed, people have the power to dethrone them and elect new ones. The people of the country should elect the most suitable persons to win this challenge. So that, we need a sound democracy to lead a happy and harmonious political life. What Peter Fenn says on a healthy democracy is extremely vital in this connection.

"A basic tenet of a healthy democracy is open dialogue and transparency."

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