

IDEAL DEMOCRATIC LEADERSHIP FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SUSTAINABLE PEACE THROUGH BUDDHIST POLITY

by Ven. Ridegama Wanarathana*

ABSTRACT

The prime purpose of the Buddha's teachings is to show the path to develop mundane life and transcendental life based on morality (sīla), concentration (samādhi) and wisdom (paññā) as a whole. It was with the noble purpose of enhancing and balancing the mundane life, the Buddha dealt with matters like economy, polity, governance, etc. Obviously, no political system can bring about peace and happiness as long as the people in the system are strongly influenced by greed, hatred and delusion. In Kūṭadanta Sutta, the Buddha suggested economic development instead of force and suppression to reduce crime. The government should use the country's resources to improve the economic conditions embarking on agricultural and rural development, providing financial support to entrepreneurs and businesses, and adequate wages for workers to maintain a decent life with human dignity. In democracy, the policy of a Buddhist democratic leadership is the spirit of democracy that should exist over all the aspects of its internal and external policies. The basic foundation of this spirit is the performance of the duties of an Āariyan wheel-turning monarch, non-violation of the Dhamma and keeping to the will of the people at all times. The Seven Conditions

*. Lecturer, Bhiksu University of Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka, B.A. (Hons.) (BPU) / M.A. (PGIPBS) / M.A. (BPU) / Ph.D. (UKel) (Reading).

of Welfare of a nation exposed in Buddhism are the most significant principles of democratic leadership; public opinion is thought very important in the democratic process. Even Vinaya rules promulgated for Buddhist monks were announced officially and publicly because of the rise of public opinion. Buddhism also gives more details with regard to equality in Buddhist democratic practice. Many Buddhist teachings exposed in many discourses such as Cakkavattisihanāda, Aggañña, Mahāsudassana, Kūṭadanta, Mahāparinibbāna etc. can be applied to make a balanced, fair, lawful and democratic polity in the world with the noble intention of establishing sustainable peace. An ideal democratic leadership with such a vision is virtually endowed with the abovementioned qualities and insight and is highly capable of establishing sustainable peace. Hence, the objective of this paper is to expose the applicability of Buddhist ideal democratic leadership for sustainable peace through Buddhist polity.

Peace in the world has been threatened due to many reasons and one of the major reasons for the destruction of sustainable peace is the dictatorial leadership or absence of democratic rulership in the modern world. According to the encyclopedia of Buddhism, “The term ‘Democracy’ in its historical setting had come to mean ‘rule by majority decision’. The term itself means ‘rule by the people’. With referent to Buddhism, a ruler could be hereditarily qualified or selected by elections. The first ruler of the world, *Mahāsammata* was elected by the people. It is also well-known that some leaders or kings came to the throne because of hereditary reasons. But in accordance with the teachings of the Buddha, the leadership, rulership or kingship is not the family heritage that goes from father to son. The mere fact remains that one who is the rightful heir to the throne by parental succession alone does not ensure his holding to political power.

Buddhist democratic ruler, as a person, is responsible for the execution of political power. One should learn, honor and respect the norm by protecting the norm that involves in respect for all life; not taking what is not given; avoidance of harmful sexual relations; not telling lies and staying away from intoxicants and drugs. According to the Cakkavattisihanada Sutta of the Dīgha

Nikāya, the king who leads by his own ideas without taking notice of public opinion did not see his country prospering. According to the Kūṭadanta Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya, the king by way of his chaplain paid careful attention to public opinion and stopped trying to do his great sacrifice. After that he found the best solution of solving the problems of his people. Buddhism also gives more details with regard to equality in Buddhist democratic practice. All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights, based on Buddhism; it is nothing new to Buddhism. The Buddhist view states that all human beings are born with complete freedom and responsibility. In addition to what has just been stated, the Buddhist view states this sense of equality in to two points:

- a. All human beings face the same basic phenomenon of birth, old age, sickness and death.
- b. All human beings are cable of overcoming these problems.

The Buddha encouraged people to be awakened to their abilities and potentialities. They are not subject to the creator God. Man is not a powerless creature, but he is his own master, one's destiny lies in one's own hand, through personal endeavor, human effort, human strength, human energy and human value, one can attain any desired objectives notwithstanding caste, creed, race or sex. As mentioned above, the Buddha is very clear that "All are equals", regardless of the fact whether they are high or low, rich or poor all are regarded as equal. But in practice, this remains an ideal which is not easily reached, and on account of that people tend to lose their confidence in democracy, equality and justice.

The Buddha did not have any idea to make radical changes in the social structure. He emphasized the importance of giving virtue to each individual rather than changing his social hierarchical position by any means. He says "the gift of the law exceeds all gifts" By law He means the Dhamma. According to Buddhist thought, political power is something that comes from people. The close relationship between the leader and the people is regarded as the most important point of Buddhist democratic practice. The ruler or the leader also uses his or her power by consulting people and inviting their maximum participation. Sovereignty is made equal to

righteousness and it gains its power not only from the people but also from righteousness. Therefore, righteousness is very essential in political power; it shows all the aspects of government from the highest to the lowest stratum. It is also a symbol of the conformation to the norm and to the will of the people. If the norm is not respected and the will of the people is disregarded, the ruler has no moral right to govern, and the people will protest against him and stray from participating in activities managed by him finally, resulting in violence throughout the country.

1. VIRTUOUS RULER AND THE EVOLUTION OF RULERSHIP

The concept of a virtuous ruler (righteous governance) found in Buddha's teachings is not a concept that existed only during Buddha's period but it is, according to Buddhism, appropriate for every ruler regardless of time and place. The prime purpose of the Buddha's teachings at the time of the Buddha in India was to show the path to develop mundane life and transcendental life based on morality (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*) as a whole (DN. 10. WPB. p.172). Hence, the Buddha had no intention to elaborate prominently on subjects like economy, governance, warfare, etc. but the way to end of social, individual and saṃsarik suffering. Nevertheless, according to the contexts demanded and required by the situation confronted at that time, the Buddha dealt with matters like economy, polity, governance, etc. in Buddhist perspective setting these matters in universally applicable stance. Therefore, certain elements regarding these worldly matters were discussed in conformity with Dhamma with a view to clarifying them on a universally wholesome basis, removing wrong views and setting them on right view.

The basic concept of the Buddha's polity is based on five precepts. King Mahāsudassana advises his subjects not to take life, not to take what is not given, not to commit sexual misconduct, not to tell lies and not to drink strong drink (DN. 17. WPB. p. 281). The practice of the Five Precepts well safeguards the five major Human Rights advocated by the United Nations Human Rights Convention. For instance, the first precept includes the virtue of non-violence that safeguards the fundamental human right of preservation of life. The second ensures the security of property and wealth. The third

contributes to the happiness of the family in which the members should reside with mutual understanding and corporation and faithful family bonds. The last two precepts support the speaking of truth which is an important virtue for social communication, and non-injury to oneself and society. This supports the ideas of the individual and social well-being.

The Buddha was neither a reformist nor a conservatist. In the Buddha's time there exists monarchical and republican forms of government and the Buddha did not guarantee any system as the best one. He paid ardent attention to principles of rule as the important factor. He, thus, laid emphasis not on the form of government but on how it, in the fact, runs. It is found that whenever the Buddha visited some state, He made himself as a good friend of the ruler whether monarchical or republican and advised him on the appropriate virtues for the stability of each system. No any new political system was given by the Buddha. He believed in improving the systems of government already available and wanted the rulers to be virtuous. Society at that time was dominated by the Brahmanical tradition. The mode of life and the society was determined by the Brahmanical tenets. The social structure was divided into four classes.

The Buddha who did not have any idea to make radical changes in the social structure emphasized the importance of giving virtue to each individual rather than changing the social hierarchical position by any means. He says "the gift of the law exceeds all gifts." By law He means the Dhamma. If the ruler and the ruled realize the natural law within themselves and society, then they could lead their lives by reason and prepare themselves to face reality paving the way for the achievement of happiness both at the individual level and social level.

According to Brahmanism, kingship was divine or a divine boon therefore; king is regarded as god on Earth. He is the representative of Mahābrahma and conducted sacrifices to keep relationship with the Brahma. He protects his people and destroys their enemies. When he grows old, his son is put on the throne and retires to forest to meditate. After death, his soul is united with Brahma. Buddhism, although the origin of kingship and its peculiar duties as discoursed

in Brahmanical teachings are rejected, introduces a powerful Wheel-rolling Monarch, a conqueror of the four quarters who has more than thousand sons, conquerors of hostile armies. He performed perfect justice and peace and brought about prosperity in his ocean – bounded land. When his life span was over, he put his son on throne advising him to perform the duties of an Āriyan Wheel-rolling Monarch. Then he left the household life into homelessness seeking heavenly life after death.

As explained in the Aggañña Sutta (DN. 27. WPB. p.413), kinship mainly depends on two factors: (i) Leader or king should be elected by the consent of the majority of people. (ii) He should please or charm the people by his own virtuous life and by acting in accordance with justice. There are many relevant materials regarding this chapter. One of other factors of the Aggañña Sutta refers to the origin of the noble classes of the Great Elect (*mahāsammata*), khattiyas, and kings (*rāja*) that occurred in accordance with actual facts. When the bad actions came into being in the society, the people felt the need of a leader to judge the actions and punish the wrong doers for the betterment of all. Accordingly, they elected a leader and he was called Mahāsammata because he was elected by the majority of people. The Khattiya class came into being as the lords of the paddy fields. The term *rāja* (king) originated in the sense that his main duty was to please the people by deed in accordance with the Dhamma. The Dukanipāta of Aṅguttara Nikāya introduces two people who emerged in the world for the welfare of many people, for the happiness of many people, for the good welfare and happiness of devas and humans. They are the Perfectly Enlightened One and the Wheel-turning Monarch.

Even before the time of the Buddha, the concept of Cakkavattirāja – an Wheel-turning Monarch prevailed. This is evident from the statement of the Brahmin advisors who predicted that prince Siddhārtha would be a universal monarch if he remained in the household life. King Suddodhna wanted his son prince Siddhārtha not to become the Buddha but to be a universal monarch. The Buddha introduced wheel turning monarchs called Dalhanemī in the Cakkavattisīhanāda Sutta (DN. 26. WPB. p. 395) and Mahāsudassana in the Mahāsudassana Sutta (DN. 26. WPB. p. 395).

The Buddha Himself had been a king or a chaplain to a king many times in his previous births. Hence, the concept of governance has an immensely long history.

According to the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (DN. 16. WPB. p. 231) at the time of the Buddha, there existed two types of states or governments. They were the Small Oligarchies like those of Vajjins or Licchavis of Vesali and the Mallas of Pāvā or Kusinārā known as Republican States (Ganarājya) and the Powerful States like Kosala with its capital at Śrāvasti in the North-Western part of central India and Magadha with its capital at Rājagaha in the Southern part of central India making emergence of powerful monarchs were known as Rājāndu. All these states were in the constant fear of losing their power at the invasion of other states. Hence, their armies were strengthened to fortify themselves against their enemies, invaded other territories, plundered their wealth and properties, killed or surrendered their enemies, imposed heavy taxes on the defeated states and made people suffer immensely. The rulers and their subordinates were in the lap of luxury while the common masses were in dire low living conditions. The Republican states (Ganatantra Rājayas) were powerful in unity, and they were admired by the Buddha. The extensive powerful states (Rājāndu) often tried to extend their territories up to these oligarchies. According to Brahmanism, the origin of kingship is god centered and the duty of a king or ruler was to destroy enemies and their cities. Hence, he was known as “Purandara”

According to the Aggañña Sutta (DN. 27. WPB. p.413) the kinship originated in the human society owing to social requirements or as a result of social evolution. At the time of the Buddha, the powerful kings of states or Rajāndu like King Pasendi Kosala, king Bimbisāra and king Ajātasattu, and the princes of small states or oligarchies or Ganarājya such as Vajjian princes, Licchavi princes of Vesāli and Malla princes of Pāvā or Kusinārā had close association with the Buddha and often sought advices from him. There existed unity, democracy, prosperity, peace etc. in the oligarchies and the Buddha admired them.

2. WHEEL – TURNING MONARCH AND HIS QUALITIES

(CAKKAVATTIRĀJA)

A Wheel-turning ruler's authority is symbolized by seven precious treasures. These are (i) Wheel treasure; (ii) Elephant treasure; (iii) Horse treasure; (iv) Jewel-Treasure; (v) Woman treasure; (vi) Household treasure; (vii) Counselor treasure (MN. 129. WPB. p. 1023). The seven treasures elucidated in the Mahāsudassana Sutta are symbolical and convey practical realities associated with good governance when they are profoundly analyzed.

The woman treasure symbolizes all women folk in the kingdom. It can be observed how in the seven principles of a democratic state the concern for girls and women and protection to them are considered important. In the Cakkavattisihanāda, king or ruler should depend on the Dhamma, honor, cherish it, pay homage to it and venerate it, have the Dhamma as badge and banner, acknowledge the Dhamma as master, he should establish guard, ward and protection according to the Dhamma for his own household, troops, nobles and vassals, for Brahmins and householders, town and country folk, ascetics and Brahmins, for beasts and birds.

A wheel turning monarch (*cakkavatti rāja*), according to the Cakkavattisihanāda Sutta (DN. 26 WPB. p. 396), is born in the world for advantage, delight, and prosperity of both humans and gods. The wheel-turning Monarch is endowed with five specific qualities: (1) He knows what is good. (2) He knows righteousness. (3) He knows the proper time. (4) He knows the assembly. (5) He knows the right measure. According to the Cakkavattisihanāda Sutta, (DN. 26. WPB. p. 395) the Buddha introduced a Wheel Turning Monarch named "Daḷhanemi" who was a righteous monarch of the law and possessor of the seven treasures. The duties of a King revealed in the Kūṭadanta Sutta are as follows (DN. 5. WPB. p. 136). (1) Distribution of grain to cultivators and fodder to cattle raisers. (2) Giving capital to traders and proper living wages to government servants. (3) Keeping the doors of his palace open to ascetics, Brahmins and wayfarers, beggars and the needy. (4) Observing and establishing the Five Precepts.

3. UTILITY OF SEVEN CONDITIONS OF NATION'S WELFARE IN

ESTABLISHING SUSTAINABLE PEACE

According to the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (DN. 16. WPB. p. 231) once the chief minister of king Ajātasattu, Brahmin Vassakkāra under the king's direction informed the Buddha of the king's intention to attack the Vajjians. At that time, the Buddha revealed the Seven Conditions of a Nation's Welfare (*satta aparihānīya dhamma*).

- i. Holding regular and frequent assemblies.
- ii. Meeting in harmony, dispersing in harmony and attending to their affairs in harmony.
- iii. Enacting neither new decree nor abolishing existing ones, but proceeding in accordance with their ancient constitutions.
- iv. Showing respect, honour and esteem towards their elders and listening to them.
- v. Refraining from abducting others' wives and maidens and detaining them.
- vi. Showing respect, honour and veneration towards the shrines within the city and outside the city and refraining from depriving them of the due offerings made to them formerly.
- vii. Protecting and guarding the Arahants in the kingdom and forming a peaceful atmosphere for other Arahants to come.

The Buddha expounded to Vajjians these Seven Principles of Preventing Decline leading to their welfare when the Buddha was dwelling at the Sārananda Shrine in Vesali. The Buddha declared that as long as Vajjians followed them, they would not decline but prosper (DN. 16. WPB. p. 240). The scrutiny of the Seven Principles of Preventing Decline preached to Vajjians by the Buddha indicates that certain concepts accepted in the contemporary society were assimilated into Buddhist interpretation of good governance. For instance, enacting neither new decree nor abolishing existing ones, but proceeding in accordance with their ancient constitutions means the acceptance of conventional laws rooted in the society by the Buddha. Showing respect, honor and esteem towards their elders and listening to them indicates that the Buddha admired the importance of utilizing the knowledge of elders who could

support the rulers. At the time of the Buddha, elder Brahmins were the advisors (courtiers) to the kings although they advised them according to governance in Brahmanic teachings. It should be mentioned here that under the advice of Brahmin courtiers arrogant Sākya were destroyed because of the war waged by them. It is said that Vajjians were defeated after sixteen year conspiracy against them by the Brahmin advisors, Sunīda and Vassakāra through instigating Vajjians to violate the Seven Principles of Preventing Decline. Although the Buddha rejected Brahmanic governance, their service, being elders endowed with knowledge was accepted in *Satta aparihānīya dhamma*.

The Wheel-turning monarch introduced in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (DN. 16. WPB. p. 266) and the Mahāsudassana Sutta (DN. 17. WP. pp.279 – 280) had his capital named Kusāvati, in Kusinārā in a former time. He was a rightful and righteous king who had conquered the land in four directions and ensured the security of his realm. He possessed the seven treasures. His kingdom was rich and prosperous and was just like the Gods' City of Ālakamandā. The factors found in the *Sapta aparihānīya dhamma* of the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (DN. 16. WPB. p. 23) such as Proceeding in accordance with their ancient constitutions, showing respect, honour and esteem towards their elders and listening to them, Showing respect, honour and veneration towards the shrines and refraining from depriving them of the due offerings made to them formerly. The duties of a king introduced in the Cakkavattisihanāda Sutta (DN. 26. WPB. pp. 396 – 397) like Protecting king's palace, his troops, nobles and people, Brahmins and householders, town and country folk, ascetics and Brahmins and protecting his land against enemies are also found in Brahmanic teachings with regard to kingly duties. Thus, the Buddha interpreted the governance which existed at that time in accordance with Buddhist principles replacing it with Buddhist social ethics such as the Five Precepts (*pañcasīla*), the Four Virtuous Qualities (*saṅgha vatthu*) – liberality, kindly speech, beneficial actions and impartiality, the Ten Meritorious Deeds (*dasapuñṇakiriya*), the Ten Perfections (*dasapāramī*), the Four Sublime Abodes (*brahmavihāra*) etc. and they were universally formularized and structuralized in Buddhist as the Ten

Obligations of Universal Monarch (*dasasakvativat*), the Ten Duties of Good Governance (*dasarājadharmā*), the Seven Conditions of a Nation's Welfare or Seven Conditions of Preventing Decline (*sapta aparihānīyadharmā*) etc.

Thus, the basic structure of the Buddha's political thought consists of a world state under a virtuous ruler of strength and purity called the Wheel Turning Monarch who protects all beings of the world by virtue of his office in accordance with Dhamma or righteousness. In this manner, a compassionate and non-violent sovereign ruler of the world protects the people of the world and leads them to material prosperity and peaceful life. The ideal of a universal order with an internal unity of its constituent parts based on compassion and non-violence is the best way of human life as reflected and suggested in Buddhism.

4. CONCLUSION

The concept of the state begins from the same time as the process of election of the leader starts. The process of evolution of the state can be seen in the following changes: pure society-impure society-family society, and state. The Buddha, however, does not refer to the machinery of the administration as a basic factor but the behavior of the ruler or the groups of rulers is much emphasized. He clearly emphasizes the personal qualities of the ruler which determines the nature and quality of the government more than anything else. The leader of the state should be a believer, and generous figure, and a doer of good deeds. Some qualities out of many ones such as high personality and ability have also been prescribed. The leader should be handsome, pleasant in appearance, inspiring, trusted, gifted with great beauty of complexion, fair in color, fine in presence; the one should be powerful in command of an army, loyal and disciplined, burning up, methinks his enemies by his every glory, he should be learned in all kinds of knowledge. The leader is not only a manager of social welfare but he must observe the precepts and purify his mind daily. His virtues are the instruments of his legitimacy. Based on foregoing findings through this article, it is clear that Buddhism is considered the ideal democracy. The Buddha taught very important principles of a democracy (Seven Conditions of Welfare); the

democratic leader that could hereditarily qualified or elected through elections; public opinion is regarded very important in the democratic process; also gave more details with regard to equality in Buddhist democratic practice and framework; socialization towards a democracy; electoral conducts and processes found in Buddhist teachings; the policy of a Buddhist democracy. The basic foundation of this spirit is the performance of the duties of an Āriyan wheel-turning monarch, the non-violation of the *Dhamma* (the norm) and keeping to the will of the people at all times.

ABBREVIATIONS

LDB: The Long Discourses of the Buddha (*Dīgha Nikāya*)

MLDB: The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha (*Majjhima Nikāya*)

WPB: Wisdom Publications. Boston

Bibliography

- Bodhi, Bhikkhu. (2017). *The Suttanipāta, An Ancient Collection of the Buddha's Discourses together with its Commentaries*, Translated from Pali, Wisdom Publications. Boston, USA.
- Ñānamoli, Bhikkhu. (2009). *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*, Translated from the Pāli by –Translation Edited and Revised by Bhikkhu Bodhi, Fourth Edition, Wisdom Publications. Boston, USA.
- Nyanatiloka, (1988). *Buddhist Dictionary, Manual of Buddhist Terms and Doctrines*, Fourth Revised Edition edited by Nyanaponika, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Sri Lanka.
- Walshe, Maurice. (2012). *The Long Discourses of the Buddha, A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya*, Translated from the Pāli by, Wisdom Publications. Boston, USA.

