

Buddhism and Good Governance

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The concept and spectrum that governance covers is both wide and encompassing. In fact, we can safely say that governance covers every aspect of social dynamics by administering processes and systems through the definition of expectations, decision making, granting or execution of power, and finally in the validating or assessing of the quality of performance. Governance is the idea of managing individual's personal, social, economic, political or religious affiliations to help promote accountability towards others, consistency and cohesiveness in policies of dealing with human relationships. Governance must ultimately deal with the use of power or the abuse of power.

As the late Chief High Priest of Malaysia and Singapore, Most Venerable Dr. K. Sri Dhammananda wrote in his paper, *Buddhism and Politics*: "There is an inherent problem of trying to intermingle religion with politics. The basis of religion is morality, purity and faith, while that for politics is power." Historically, we have seen many reports on the abuse of power. We have seen how religion is being used to justify political struggles, how it is used to sanctify and purify the acts of killing, persecutions and destruction of property.

Every country, business, society and culture has in fact by their own definition of governance and in their own fashion focuses on exercising control over the masses by the few. Whether governance is that of the liberal attitudes of a democratic government or the total subjugation of people to the military wills as exhibited by the dictators of military government, we observe that religions are always in the throes of power politics. The question must truly focus on whether Buddhism is like other religions, having socio-political agenda? Does it focus on liberating people or helping to establish power dominance over the populace? Is people's existence in ignorance to be considered bliss to the few or the education of the masses to the ultimate truth of the Buddha's teachings, the most important reality to living in this Samsara?

Again as our late venerable has said, "the thrust of Buddha Dhamma is not directed to the creation of new political institution or establishing political arrangements ... it seeks to approach the problems of the society by reforming individuals constituting that society and by suggesting some general principles through which the society can be guided towards

greater humanism, improved welfare of its members and more equitable sharing of resources.” So, where is Buddha’s conception of governance or the Buddhist model of governance? We can see some of these concepts being taught by the Buddha through the scriptures and more importantly, are we personally using them as a model to develop ourselves or just intellectualize it?

As leaders in Buddhism, be it academically or socially, it is the duty of leaders to uphold the Buddha Dhamma to be considered a practicing Buddhist and the priority of the leader is to first apply what is taught into their daily life! The first rule of governance is found in the Kalama Sutta, it is not what to believe that is important but to see what is being demonstrated by the leader that brings individuals out of suffering that is important. Removing instead the ignorance from the people’s eyes and minds, liberating them from the “reality” of the Samsara and ultimately, finding a place to exist within the society, peacefully and harmlessly. So, when we discuss about governance, are we pulling all the materials from the scriptures to practice or we are implying conceptually what the social reality we want to attain and trying to align Buddhist teachings to that social reality?

The second consideration for governance is the ten rules for governing found in the scriptures. These ten rules are as applicable today as back then when the Buddha uttered these truths. What are these ten rules¹?

- 1) Be liberal and avoid selfishness.
- 2) Maintain high moral character and accountability.
- 3) Be prepared to sacrifice one’s own pleasure for the well-being of the masses.
- 4) Be honest and maintain absolute integrity.
- 5) Be kind and gentle.
- 6) Lead a simple life for others to emulate.
- 7) Be free from hatred of any kind.
- 8) Exercise non-violence, especially the playing of power politics.
- 9) Practice patience.
- 10) Respect public opinions to promote peace and harmony.

¹ Found in the Jataka tales, also called the “Dasa Raja Dhamma” or Ten Royal Virtues.

It is therefore, imperative for leaders to administrate themselves first as the “Prime Minister”, not as first amongst the equals but as the primarily candidate for mental overhaul. In the scriptures, the Buddha regards the behavior of leaders who are in the position of governing others as very important and they must be of the right character and mental development. We have in another sutta the advice of the Buddha’s regarding a mind of a well developed individual:²

- 1) The beauty of a good governor is to be accountable morally, disciplined in actions, and understands the root problem to the issues.
- 2) The happiness of a good governor is to be detached from forces that corrupt the mind, be contented and mindful.
- 3) The wealth of a good governor is to be developed in loving kindness, not having any hatred or ill will towards anyone.
- 4) The power of a good governor is to remain uncorrupted in nature, developing wisdom that leads to a strengthened mind.

In the same sutta, the Buddha had expressed that social issues or ills must be addressed for the society to remain peaceful and for the people to be happy. If poverty remains as one of the biggest issue of the society, any individual rooted to poverty will not only crave but in due time, decides to take away someone else’s possession, leading to further disharmony, increasing social immorality and crime. No amount of laws passed, enforcement carried out or punishment meted will eradicate the crimes of poverty and to think so is just idealistic. For issues like poverty to end, it is to develop people with much, to share with those who have not’s. We have to teach people to be contented with what they have in order to eradicate the poverty in the mind.

The third issue in governance must relate to the fundamentals of Buddha’s teachings, if it is to be considered as the primary practice for governance. His teachings on governance are really based on the development of the human mind. As long as one does not recognize the reality of the Samsara (or the cycle of our existences), the cycle of suffering repeats itself.

It is foolish to think that proper governance will help you to attain the right mind. Rather, it is the right mind that will give the right governance. Therefore, the right mind is

² Digha Nikaya 26, Cakkavatti Sihananda Sutta – the Wheel Turning Monarch.

not only visionary; it has to be practical as well. To be practical, one has to be constantly self-assessing. If we do not constantly assess ourselves, we will diminish our understanding of suffering, and then this Reality or Samsara will just be a playground. Like the term “There is suffering” just states a reality. It is not enough for us to just know the reality but we have to be self-assessing about this reality, we have to ask ourselves this important question, “Are we causing more suffering to others by our current actions or are we helping people to come out of suffering?” If we cannot deal with something so simple, then all the complexities of living cannot be resolved at all! So, I would like then to ask a simple question, “How much must be done, before one can start one’s practice?” Really, the practice!

In history, we have seen that one of the most important individuals to demonstrate the law of ethical governance was King Asoka³. To those that read history, we know what he has gone through and what he became thereafter, but it is this single transformation that took from him from being a tyrant to be an empathetic monarch with an endearing remark, “Whatever exertion I make, I strive only to discharge the debt that I owe to all living creatures.”⁴ This should be the mind of a leader in discharging of one’s duties, whether be it in a relationship, family, society or business. It shows that it is the self-assessing accountability that one has to constantly reflect and act on.

In so saying, there will always be the issue of being taken advantage of in the Samsara. Remember that suffering is the order of the day, the life force of Samsara. Anyone suffering would want to relieve themselves of suffering, but to most, that relief comes through the delusory thinking that it can be resolved if one acquires material or existential comforts through the “comforts” of others. They will capitalize on others to get what they want. Therefore, there is no doubt that some people will be taken advantage of and are the ones that were being taken advantage of showing signs of weakness? Is governance then about going around differentiating the right from the wrong or to punish the misdeeds of others? If so, then when does development stop and justification start?

Lastly, in the terms of governance, we can see that the Buddha himself was a social reformer in his days; he not only gave advice to the kings, Brahmins and highly respected

³ Indian Emperor of the Mauryan Empire (circa from 304 BCE to 232 BCE).

⁴ Kosambi, *The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India*, pp. 141-48.

individuals of the society. Amongst the other things he has done, he condemned the caste system and made people to attain nobility not through ancestral heritage but by developing the mind and through exemplary behavior. He spoke of the need to improve the socio-economic conditions with more equitable distribution of wealth amongst the rich and the poor. He not only accepted outcastes into his order, raised the status of women, advice on the incorporation of humanistic values to the administration of governance in family, society, politics and business. He taught and reforming internally the individual. Such change inside had such a long-lasting effect, not a short-lived one brought peace to many because it affects the consciousness at the root of the mind and not superficially. Therefore, we should understand the nature of Buddha's teachings and the socio-political agenda of governance. Though the two do not really mix together, we should try to establish the right framework to develop Buddhist teachings into a positive, progressive and proactive form of governance.
