

## **The Buddhist Principles of Good Governance**

By  
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The oldest theory of state, though it is not systematically presented as in the *Arthashastra* of Kautlya, is found in the Pali Canon, the sacred literature of the Buddhists. The theory of state in the Pali Canon may be antecedent to that of any other literature of the world. The following is an attempt to codify the Buddhist theory of state and the principles of governance as documented in the Pali Canon. I should categorically state that the information given below is nothing but a restatement of the details found in the Canonical texts.

### **The origin of the state**

The view accepted before, during and after the Buddha in India was that the state is an institution created by the omnipotent God. The idea that God created the state to wipe out social vices is common even to the Western cultures. For the first time in the history of mankind, it was the Buddha who claimed that man made the state. What the Buddha proclaims in this regard can be summarised as follows: With the change of the primitive society the distinct character of which is the common property, social vices became rampant among the individuals. The society became violent and indisciplined. The result of these changes was the establishment of a new social order based on the system of private property. A necessity of a new system of governance arose to establish law and order and to safeguard the private property. At this juncture of unprecedented changes, man decided to establish the state, the head of which was the king. The state came into operation on a contract reached upon between the electors and the elect (1). Therefore, Buddhism reiterates that the state originated on a social contract.

### **The essential constituents of the state**

It was the Buddha who identified the essential features in an extensive and elaborate way in the political history, at least, of India. The information scattered in the Canonical works enumerates the following essential features that go together to form the state.

1. Geographical area which is sovereign.
2. A person whose authority is undisputed.
3. Authority of punishment.
4. Authority to maintain the armed forces.
5. Centralized legislative power.
6. Officialdom.
7. Organized system of economy based on the basic principles of morality (2).

### **Administrative system**

The king is the head of the state (3). The authority assigned to him indicates that Buddhism prescribes a centralized administration. In this regard, two points have to be emphasised here. Firstly, Buddhism prefers the monarchical system to the republican system (4). By the time that the Buddha came to the scene, India had discarded the republican system replacing it by the monarchical system. Secondly, Buddhism introduced the system of governance under the *Cakravarti* king to centralise North India, which was divided into various small kingdoms (5). Buddhism further declares that the ownership of land, powers of judiciary and legislature should be centralised. The *Cakravarti* king will give effect to such a centralised system of governance.

### **The ideal ruler**

In a careful scrutiny of discourses, the following qualities are reckoned as essential to become an effective ruler.

1. Reputation.

2. Economic prosperity.
3. Military strength.
4. Competent advisors.
5. Diplomatic acclaim.
6. Personality.
7. Parents' affection.
8. Patriotism and popularity.
9. Competency and discipline.
10. Education, intelligence and intuition (6).

### **The role of the state**

The society established the state with the following objectives. Therefore, the duty of the state is to fulfil them in which ever name and in what ever form the state comes into function.

Firstly, the state is under the obligation to protect the living beings within its territory (7). To this end, it should take all measures to maintain law and order. This can be achieved only when the authority of punishment is put into full operation. It can in no way avoid this responsibility. Any failure to put this into practice violates the contract that is agreed upon by the electors and the elect.

Secondly, the state is solely and purely responsible to protect the private property (8). Man needed an institution of the nature of state only when his belongings were stolen by others. Therefore, the prime duty of the state is not only to protect what man earns but also to take measures to its furtherance.

### **The state and the economy**

The economic policy of the state should be based on the development of the private enterprise. The aim of this policy is the poverty alleviation. Buddhism declares that the origin of all social vices is poverty. It can be eliminated by creating a society where job opportunities are available for those who are at the employable age (*sakammapasuta*).

Therefore, the state should be vigilant to wipe out the problem of unemployment by developing the spheres of agriculture, trade and government service (9). It is the duty of the state to take all measures to generate wealth among the poor. The possibility for a rich few to accumulate wealth does not exist in a state where Buddhist economic policies are practised.

Buddhism is a religion based on morality. Therefore, Buddhism does not recommend any economic measure on the expense of morality. The state is duty bound to punish those who violate moral principles in the name of economic development.

### **The state and the warfare**

Buddhism is against war. However, the fact that the state cannot refrain from war is also recognised in Buddhism. As non-violence permits to punish the criminals, on unavoidable situations, the state is permitted to engage in warfare. The Buddhist political philosophy gives permission to the state to consider war to protect the country, its people, state property and private property. According to Buddhism, no state comes into effect without armed forces. The prime duty of the armed forces is to go to the battlefield under compelling circumstances.

The inherent relationship between the state and the warfare is directly emphasised in the concept of the *Cakravarti* king (10) and in the teaching of the seven conditions for welfare and development in Buddhism (11).

### **The state and the common law**

Buddhism does not endorse a system of governance with dictatorial powers. According to Buddhism, the sovereignty rests with the people. Therefore, the Buddhist political philosophy recognises various methods and systems to guarantee the rights of the people and to curtail

the powers of the state. The pride of place is given among them to the concept of the authority of righteousness. Even the *Cakravarti* king, who is considered to be the most powerful ruler on earth, cannot violate this principle (12). If I may put it in today's parlance, law is above all. The ruler has no power or right to go beyond the law. The contract agreed upon between the electors and the elect has well recognised this (13). What the concept of the authority of righteousness recommends is that the state cannot violate the tradition, morality, rites and rituals, norms and values and religion (14). When the state is on the path of Buddhist principles, there is no room for any form of dictatorship.

### **Notes**

The notes in this paper refer to the Pali texts published the Pali Text Society of London.

1. Dighanikaya (=DN), III. pp. 80-98
2. Based on the Aggannasutta, Cakkavattisihanadasutta and the Kutadantasutta of the Dighanikaya
3. Anguttaranikaya (=AN), IV. 223 : issariyabala rajano  
Sanyuttanikaya (=SN), I.42: raja ratthassa pannananam  
Suttanipata. p.111: raja mukham manussanam
4. See for details, Abeynayake, Oliver, Fundamentals of Buddhist Polity, Singapore 1995, pp. 30-59
5. Ibid. pp. 60-87
6. AN.II.151; AN.III. 164
7. AN.I.109; DN.III.61
8. DN.III.92f.
9. DN.I.135
10. DN.II.187
11. Read DN.II.72ff. with commentarial remarks in the Dighanikaya Commentary.
12. AN.III.244: Dhammarajasutta
13. DN.IV.92-93

14. DN.II.72ff.