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Buddhist Ideals of Government

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By

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Buddhist Ideals of Government

“Our ancient kings considered hitherto the practice of virtue as their only duty; they knew how to rule without being severe and honoured the Three Jewels; they governed and helped the world, and were happy if men practised righteousness. For myself I desire respectfully, in concert with the son of heaven, to magnify the Good Law in order to save beings from the evil of continued existence (in *samsāra*).”

Letter sent to the Chinese emperor
by king Mānasam of Ceylon in 423 A.D.

Buddhism, like any other religion, lays emphasis on spiritual values rather than on material ones; on detachment from things of the world rather than on attachment to them; on the religious side of life rather than on the secular side of it. Buddhism does not, however, neglect the material, the secular and the worldly aspects of life altogether. In fact, there is a Discourse in the Buddhist Scriptures, that has been called the Gihī Vinaya or Code of Discipline for Laymen, wholly

devoted to the householder's life. [1] It sets out in detail the layman's duties towards his neighbours and also the methods of disciplining himself to be a good and useful citizen. The Buddhist Scriptures also set out certain norms of conduct for rulers as well as for subjects. They also contain references to various forms of government, prevailing in India at the time, and, significantly, the Buddha's own words expressing his preference of the democratic form of government.

It must be remembered that the Buddha was born into a society which, comparatively speaking, was politically advanced, and which through the ages had developed certain very sound ideals of government. In the Manu Neeti or the Code of Manu, the Hindus already had laws hallowed by time to guide them in their civic duties. Incidentally, "Manu," like Moses of the Bible, was the mythical lawgiver of the Indian people. These laws discussed not only the rights of the rulers, but also their duties towards their subjects. They also discussed the obligations of the subjects towards the rulers and also their rights. It is, therefore, necessary to have some idea about the Hindu views of government if we are to appreciate the Buddhist ideals of government.

Matsya Nyāya

The Hindu ideas of government were based on a theory called the *matsya nyāya*, literally meaning the “law of fish”.

The term *matsya nyāya* can be more appropriately rendered into English by the expression the “law of the jungle.”—“Why should there be governments in the world at all?” “Why should there be some men to rule over other men?” “Why should there be laws which men were required to obey on pain of punishment?” The Hindu thinkers answered these questions by pinpointing a fundamental law of nature: “The Matsya Nyāya,” the law whereby the small fish becomes the prey of the big fish. Government, rulers and laws are necessary to prevent this natural law from operating in human society. Remove the government, remove the rulers and remove the laws, and human society will degenerate into a state of anarchy in which the stronger will destroy the weak. “If there is no rule of law,” says the Manu Samhita, “the strong would devour the weak like fishes.” “If there is no ruler to wield punishment on earth” says the Mahabharata, “the strong would devour the weak like fishes in water. It is related that in the days of old people were ruined through sovereignlessness, devouring one another like the stronger fish preying upon the feebler.”

It will be seen that this Hindu theory of government

was based on a belief in the innate depravity of man. If there is no strong authority to keep men under control, the stronger would destroy the weaker, just as the big fish destroy the small fish in the sea. Government, rulers and laws become necessary to prevent this “*matsya nyāya*” operating in human society.

This theory of government naturally led to the corollary that there must be a controlling authority, and that authority must be vested with power to inflict punishment or, *daṇḍa*,

The Hindu monarch was thus enjoined to adopt *caturōpāya* or the four-fold policy in ruling over the people: *Sama*, *dāna*, *daṇḍa*, *bheda*. *Sama* means peace: the wise ruler must maintain peace among his subjects. *Dāna* means charity: the wise ruler must be charitable. *Daṇḍa* means punishment: the wise ruler must punish the wrong done according to the gravity of the crime. *Bheda* means creating division where necessary: the wise ruler must bring about differences among his subjects in order to make his position secure. In other words, he must adopt the “divide and rule” policy.

Amity

The Buddha differed radically from the Hindu view

that *matsya nyāya* is the basic law of nature. He certainly saw the struggle for existence that was so evident in life but this he attributed to man's ignorance rather than to his innate depravity. The Blessed One also saw that man was ever ready to live in peace and amity with his fellow beings, to co-operate with his fellow beings, and even to sacrifice himself for the sake of his fellow beings, provided he was properly guided. In the Buddha's view it was not discipline imposed from above or external authority that was necessary to control man, but self-understanding and inward discipline.

The law of the jungle was certainly not universal even in the jungle. There was amity and co-operation even among the animals in the jungle—as the Buddha points out in several Jātaka stories.

Owing to this fundamental difference in outlook between Hinduism and Buddhism, we see that Buddhism lays little or no emphasis on authority (*bala*) or punishment (*daṇḍa*). For example, we observe that instead of the *caturōpāya* or the four-fold policy of *sama*, *dāna*, *daṇḍa*, *bheda* of the Hindus, the Buddhist scriptures speak of, the *catus-saṅgraha vastu* (Pāli: *catusaṅgaha-vatthu*), or the four ways of treating subjects. They are, *dāna* or charity; *priya-vacana* or kind speech; *artha cariya*, or the spirit of frugality and of service, and *samanātmatā* or equality.

Thus, according to Buddhism the virtuous king should practise *dāna* or charity. Charity here includes not only the alms given to the poor but also gifts given to those who serve the monarch loyally. The virtuous king also must practise *priyavacana*, or kind speech. He must on no account use unkindly or harsh words towards anyone.

The king also must cultivate *artha cariya*. The word *artha cariya* has been interpreted to mean the spirit of service as well as the practice of economy and living the simple life. The good king or ruler also must cultivate *samanātmata* or equality. That is, while retaining the exalted position of the ruler, he must consider himself in no way superior to the least of his subjects, and he must also learn to dispense justice to his subjects without fear or favour. The righteous monarch must also learn to treat everyone equally.

Dasa Rāja Dharma

In the *dasa-rāja-dharma* or the ten royal virtues, the Buddhist ideal of kingship is further elaborated upon. The ten royal virtues are *dāna*, charity; *sīla*, morality; *pariccāga*, munificence; *ajjavan*, straightforwardness; *majjavan*, gentleness; *tapam*, restraint; *akkodho*, non-hatred; *avihiṃsā*, non-violence; *khanti*, patience, and *avirodhatā*, friendliness and amity.

Dana in this context means giving of alms to the needy. It is the duty of the king to look after the welfare of his needy subjects, and to give them food, clothing and other wherewithals.

Sīla here means morality. The monarch must so conduct himself in private and public, life as to be a shining example to his subjects.

Pariccāga means the grant of gifts to those who serve the monarch loyally. By the grant of gifts not only does the monarch acknowledge their efficient and loyal service, but he also spurs them on to more efficient and more loyal service.

Ajjavan means that the monarch must be absolutely straightforward. The good king must never take recourse to any crooked or doubtful means to achieve his ends. His yea must be yea, and nay must be nay.

Majjavan means gentleness. The monarch's straightforwardness and rectitude that often will require firmness, should be tempered with gentleness. His gentleness will keep his firmness from being over-harsh or even cruel, while his firmness will keep gentleness from turning into weakness. A harmonious balance of these two qualities is essential not only for a ruler but for all leaders of men.

Tapan means the restraint of senses. The ideal monarch is the one who keeps his five senses under

strict control, shunning indulgence in sensual pleasures.

Akkodha means non-hatred. The good king must not harbour grievances against those who injured him, but must act with forbearance and love.

Avihiṃsā means non-violence. The Monarch should not indulge in games where killing is resorted to, or cause injury to any being. He must practise non-violence to the greatest possible extent that is reconcilable with the duties of a ruler.

Khanti means patience, The king must conduct himself with patience, courage and fortitude on all occasions. In joy and sorrow, in prosperity and in adversity, in victory and defeat, he must conduct himself with calmness and dignity without giving in to emotions.

Avirodhata means non-enmity, friendship. The king must cultivate the spirit of amity among his subjects, by himself acting always in a spirit of amity and benevolence. It will be seen that avirodhata is in this context opposed to bheda—the divide and rule policy in the Hindu statecraft.

The Buddha also laid emphasis on the fact that the evil and the good of the people depend on the behaviour of their rulers; and for the good of the people he set out these ten royal virtues to be

practised by the rulers of men.

Simple though this looks to us, it must be viewed from the point of view of contemporary society where the Brahmin hierarchy divided the society permanently into various castes, and gave religious sanction to that division. No doubt the Buddha had in mind the claims of the Brahmins that they were a unique people being “twice-born” once in the natural way and again from the shoulder of the creator himself.

Equality

The Buddha’s rejection of caste and class was not merely theoretical. He admitted men of all castes into the Order. Upāli, a former barber, Sunita a former outcaste, found honoured places in the Order.

The Buddha says: “Monks, just as all the great rivers, that is to say the Ganges, the Jammu, the Aciravati, the Sarabhu, the Mahi, on reaching the great ocean lose their former names and identities and are reckoned as the great ocean, similarly the Kshatriya, the Brahmana, the Vaisya and the Sudra, after entering this Sangha lose their former identities, and become the members of one Order.”

The Chinese pilgrims Fa-Hien, Yuan Chang and I-

Tsing tell us that these democratic and equalitarian concepts were still fostered in India centuries after the great decease of the Buddha.

“Oriental” Despotism

The constant reference by Western writers to oriental despotism has created the impression in the English reader’s mind that until the advent of the Europeans there was no good or popular government in Asian lands and that with rare exceptions like the reign of Asoka it was a case of despotic monarchs tyrannising over a helpless people. The study of both Hindu and Buddhist literature shows that among the Indian rulers there were certainly not more (and probably less) pleasure-seeking despots than among their Western counterparts. Ancient Indian society was, no doubt, feudal—but it was also a co-operative society. The type of oppression of the peasant by the lord as was witnessed in France before the French Revolution was never seen within the boundaries of Hindu or Buddhist India.

Story of Ummadayanti

The story of Ummadayanti in the *Jātakamālā* illustrates this point very well.

The Bodhisattva was once born into the Royal family of the Sibis and in due time became the king of the Sibis. One day while touring the city with his retinue he saw Ummadayantī, one of the most beautiful women among the Sibis and fell in love with her at first sight. But to the chagrin of the king he learned that Ummadayantī was already married. He also learned that the husband was no other than Abhiparaga, one of the officers of the Royal household itself.

The king felt quite ashamed of his sudden passion for a woman who was married, and kept the knowledge of it to himself, and tried his best to extinguish the flame of love which arose in his heart.

The king thus suffered in silence because of the love he had for Ummadayantī. Abhiparaga, however, came to know about the king's condition and the reason for it. One day he approached the king while he was alone and broached the subject in a most tactful way. Abhiparaga told the king that he was very well aware of the reason for the king's poor condition and suggested to the king most respectfully that the king accept Ummadayantī as his consort.

The king was confounded and was stricken with shame. The secret love that was gnawing his heart was now known to the husband of the very woman whom

he loved. And, here he was himself offering her to him, his king, because of the love and devotion Abhiparaga had for him.

“No, no,” said the king, “that may not be. I would lose my merit and would know myself to be immoral. Further my wicked deed would be known also to the public”.

Abhiparaga argued again and again with the king with a view to convincing him that he was doing no wrong in accepting Ummadayanti from his hands.

The king finally said, “No doubt, it is your great affection for me that prompts you to the effort to promote my interest without considering what is right and wrong on your aide. But this very consideration induces me the more to prevent you. Verily, indifference as to the censure of men cannot at any rate be approved”.

The king continued, “The evil and good the people do depend on the behaviour of their rulers. For this reason, and taking into account the attachment of my subjects, I shall continue to love the path of the pious above all in conformity with my reputation.

“As the herd goes after the leading bull in any direction, whether the right one or the wrong one, following his steps in the very same manner, the subjects imitate the behaviour of their rulers without

scruple and undauntedly.

“You must take also this into consideration.

“If I should lack the power of ruling my own self, say, into what condition would I bring this people who long for protection from my side.

“Thus considering and regardful of the good of my subjects, my own righteousness and my spotless fame, I do not allow myself to submit to my passion. I am the leader of my subjects, the bull of my herd.”

The Buddha in this story showed how a king should conduct himself.

Firstly, he must, put his private passions aside in the interest of the people.

Secondly, he must always pay heed to public opinion.

Thirdly, there must not be any divorce between his private life and his public life—both must be without blemish.

Fourthly, he must always be regardful of the good of the subjects.

Fifthly he must give the correct leadership in all matters to the people.

Elsewhere the Buddha says that whether a nation is just and good depends on the conduct of the rulers.

“Monks, 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 become just and good, the rank and file become just and good. And, when the rank and file become just and good, the people become just and good.”

It was a belief among the Buddhists that even rains came in due season when the rulers are just and good.

Democracy

Having said so much about the ideals of kingship in Buddhism, we must ask ourselves whether Buddhism considers monarchy itself as the ideal form of government. During the Buddha's time there were a number of great kingdoms, in India, such as Magadha and Kosala. There were also a number of democratic states at the time. The Buddha has definitely expressed himself in favour of the democratic form of government and also expressed the view that it was a form of government which was conducive to the stability of society.

Referring to the preparations made by king Ajatasattu to attack one of these democratic

principalities—that of the Vajjians—the Buddha said:

“Ānanda, have you heard that the Vajjians regularly assemble together in large numbers?”

“I have heard so,” said the Venerable Ānanda.

“Well Ānanda, so long as the Vajjians assemble regularly and in large numbers, just so long may the prosperity of the Vajjians be looked for and not their decay.

“So long, Ānanda, as the Vajjians assemble in harmony and disperse in harmony; so long as they conduct their business in harmony; so long as they introduce no revolutionary ordinance or break up no established ordinance, but abide by the law; so long as they honour, revere, esteem and worship the elders among the Vajjians and deem them worthy of listening to; so long as the women and maidens can go about, without being molested or abducted; so long as they honour, revere, esteem and worship the Vajjian shrines, both the inner and the outer; as long as they allow not the customary offerings given and performed, to be neglected; so long as customary watch and ward over the holy men that are among them is well kept, so that they may have free access to the realm and having

entered may dwell pleasantly therein, just so long as they do these things, Ānanda, may the prosperity of the Vajjians be looked for and not their decay.”

That Buddhism helped greatly in the evolution of democratic forms of government in ancient India is borne out by what the Marquess of Zetland, a former Viceroy of India, says in his introduction to the book *Legacy of India*. Lord Zetland says:

“We know indeed that political science—Arthaśāstra in Sanskrit—was a favourite subject with Indian scholars some centuries before the Christian Era. The social contract as the origin of kingship is discussed in the now famous work attributed to Kautilya, the Chief minister of emperor Chandragupta, about the year 300 B.C. And it would seem that the people who contracted for a king in these early days did so in order that there should be some external authority capable of ensuring that the laws and regulations of the various corporate bodies which had come into existence, were respected. ‘The king,’ wrote Yājñavalkya, ‘must discipline and establish again on the path of duty all such as have erred from their own laws, whether families, castes, guilds or associations ...’ It is

notable that the tendency towards self-government evidenced by these various forms of corporate activity received fresh impetus from the Buddhist rejection of authority of the priesthood and further by the doctrine of equality as exemplified by its repudiation of caste. It is indeed to the Buddhist books that we have to turn for an account of the manner in which the affairs of these early examples of representative self-governing institutions were conducted. And it may come as a surprise to many to learn that in the assemblies of the Buddhists in India two thousand or more years ago are to be found the rudiments of our own parliamentary practice of the present day. The dignity of the assembly was preserved by the appointment of a special officer—the embryo of 'Mr. Speaker' in our House of Commons. A second officer was appointed whose duty it was: to see that when necessary a quorum was secured, the prototype of the parliamentary chief whip in our own system. A member initiating business did so in the form of a motion which was then open to discussion. In some cases this was done once only, in others three times, thus anticipating the practice of parliament in requiring that a bill be read a

third time before it became law. If discussion disclosed a difference of opinion the matter was decided by the vote of majority, the voting being by ballot.”

In the context of the knowledge we now have about the democracies in ancient India, the Buddha’s appreciative reference to the Vajjian Republic is most significant.

As Lord Zetland says, the Buddha’s doctrine of equality made a profound impression on the social and political life of the Indian people—and the influence lasted for nearly 14 centuries. In the Sutta Nipāta, we find the following statement of the Buddha:

“Vāseṭṭha” (he replied), “I will expound
To you in gradual and very truth
Division in the kind of living things.
For kinds divide! Behold the grass and trees.
They reason not, yet they possess the mark
After their kind; for kinds, indeed divide.
Consider then the beetles, moths and ants,
They after their kind too possess the mark.
And so four-footed creatures, great and small
...
The reptiles, snakes, the long-backed animals,
Fish and pond-feeders, water-denizens,

Birds and the winged creatures, fowls of the air,
They after their kind all possess the mark;
For kinds divide. Each after his kind bears
His mark. In man it is not manifold.
Not in the hair, or head or ears or eyes,
Not in the mouth or nose or lips or brows,
Not in the throat, hips, belly or the back,
Not in the rump, sex organs or the breast,
Not in hands or feet, fingers or nails,
Not in the legs or thighs, colour or voice,
Is mark that forms his kind, as in all else.
Nothing unique is in men's bodies found;
The difference in men is nominal." (Sutta-
nipāta)

Twenty centuries before the revolutionaries of France raised the standard of "liberty, fraternity and equality," the Buddha had enunciated these very values as essentials of good government!

Notes

1. Sigalovada Sutta: translated in *Everyman's Ethics*,
The Wheel No. 14. [\[Back\]](#)

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