

The Humanistic Advice of the Buddha to Political Leaders

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ABSTRACT

This paper will survey the Agama Sutras for discourses that the Buddha and his disciples engaged in with Indian political leaders. The purpose of this paper is to identify the contents delivered and methods utilized by the Buddha in his discussions with rulers and political leaders. The relevance of Buddha's advice and methods across time and space is determined by the political situation and social environment under which the advice is given. Hence, the context of the Indian political, economic and social conditions will also be studied. From this paper, we can see how Buddha has been compassionately concerned for the people: he has been advising political leaders on their personal lives, as well as how to rule for the benefit of their subjects. Buddha has taught on matters ranging from proper diet, reduction of greed, ethical rule, to the prevention of conflicts and wars. His teachings have ranged from ethical to philosophical. He has narrated stories from the cosmological past as well as given analogies from contemporary times. Through a variety of means, the Buddha and his disciples have taught political leaders how to govern themselves and others in order to maintain health, justice and peace.

Introduction

Indian Buddhist writings are filled with discourses between Buddhist sages and various audiences, ranging from the elite to the underprivileged. Among the audience is a class of political leaders, generally of the khattiya class – kings, princes, clan headmen, generals and others in commanding positions. Buddha and various Indian sages have given advice to these political leaders, or answered their challenges and queries. This paper will identify the contents delivered and the methods used by the Buddha in his discussions with political leaders.

The methodology used is historical, based on textual evidences from the Nikayas (Digha, Majjhima, Samyutta and Avguttara). Common themes will be identified from the teachings delivered. Also, the common methods of refutation and persuasion will be studied.

Socio-Political Environment

Royal support was important to the spread of Buddhism in its early stages. Buddha had maintained special relationships with various kings, as could be discerned from the numerous discourses between Buddha and these political leaders, as well as the references he had made to kings in his teachings. In return, the kings offered protection and necessities to the Buddhist sangha (Gokhale 731). The extent of royal support could be seen from the fact that even after the death of the Buddha, King Ajatasattu of Magadha was willing to sponsor the First Buddhist Council at Rajagaha.

During the time of the Buddha, there was no paramount sovereignty in India, only small aristocratic republics and powerful kingdoms¹ (Rhys-Davids 1-2). The method of governance was different for republics and kingdoms, as could be seen from Buddha's advice, which would be analyzed in the next section. These republics or kingdoms had a ruler or a consul of decision-making chiefs (*raja*), territory (*rattha*),

bureaucracy (*smacca, parisajja*), armed forces (*balam*), treasury (*kosakotthagara*), allies (*anuyutta khattiya, kuddarajano*), and people (*manussa*) (Gokahale 734). The common groups of people mentioned in the Nikayas were the *khattiyas*, *brahmanas*, householders (*gahapati*) and ascetics (*samana*). Interestingly, the discourses with political leaders in the Nikayas ranked *khattiyas* above *brahmanas*. This could be a mark of respect to the audience, especially since the Buddha himself was a member of the *khattiya* caste. Territorially, kingdoms consisted of villages (*gama*), market towns (*nigama*), countryside (*janapada*), city (*nagara*) and frontier (*paccanta*, where security often was a problem) (Gokhale 734).

The heads of state that were often encountered in the Nikayas were King Pasenadi of Kosala (38 references), King Ajatasattu of Magadha (7 references), Cakyan raja Mahanama (5 references), among many others. Pasenadi was a contemporary of the Buddha, and both were Kosalans (Gokhale 731). As could be seen from the numerous references, the King often sought the counsel of the Buddha. Kings Pasenadi and Ajatasattu were relatives and enemies over the village of Kaci. This illustrated the complexities of the political environment as kingdoms sought matrimonial alliances for peace-keeping and territorial expansion at the same time. *Raja* Mahanama was the cousin of Buddha, whose son Anuruddha joined the Buddhist sangha and became one of the Buddha's chief disciples with the divine eye (Fo Guang Buddhist Dictionary). King Bimbisara did not feature in the Nikayas, although he was a more prominent figure in other parts of the Canon, such as the Vinayas and Dhammapadatthakatha.

The heads of state had immense political and military power. The king was also regarded as the head of justice (Mehta 433). The king could appoint ministers and/or princes to cover this duty. The judge(s) would work out of a Hall of Judgment (Mehta 434). In the case of republics or republican villages, a Mote Hall was the place of public assembly of householders as well as the office for administrative and judicial business (Rhys-Davids 10). Common crimes then appeared to be theft, robbery, drinking, slander and adultery (Mehta 435-441). From this list of common crimes, it became apparent why the Buddha stipulated the five precepts. Punishments meted out could range from fines through imprisonment to death penalty. Criminals were treated with great humiliation and in a non-humanitarian manner (Mehta 441).

The majority of Indians then were villagers, subsisting on agriculture and various handicrafts. Householders were not rich, but there was sufficient for simple needs (Rhys-Davids 26). There were artisans living in towns, working as elephant-riders, cavalry, charioteers, archers, soldiers, slaves, cooks, barbers, bath-attendants, confectioners, garland-makers, washermen, weavers, basket-makers, potters, clerks and accountants (Rhys-Davids 39). There were also merchants traveling across the country in carts (Rhys-Davids 42). Monarchs amassed much of their wealth through land taxes from the villagers.

Advice Given to Political Leaders

The Buddha and his disciples were consulted on various topics, ranging from method of government to personal well-being. The political leaders were also curious with the development of members of the sangha, how they practiced and what goals they pursued. From the discourses recorded in the Nikayas, the following themes seemed to recur: establishing the credibility of the Buddhist sangha and practice, characteristics of

humanistic rule, method of personal practice to accumulate merits for better rebirths, and method of liberation from the cycle of rebirths. The Buddha and his disciples were eloquent and skillful in applying Buddhist tenets to the practical lives of these leaders.

Credibility and supremacy

As the Buddhist Order was proposing a system of belief and practice different from the prevalent Brahmanical teachings, the Buddha had to establish a position of authority and he based it on the Dhamma (Norm):

“I am a veritable son of the Exalted One, born from his mouth, born of the Norm, created by the Norm, heir of the Norm. And why? Because, Vasettha, these are names tantamount to Tathagata: Belonging to the Norm, and again, belonging to the highest, and again, one with the Norm, and again, one with the Highest” (DN.27.9 *Agāṇṇa Sutta*²)

In the same discourse, the Buddha also pointed to his superiority over King Pasenadi of Kosala, who would pay homage to the Buddha, and declaring the Buddha to be better-born, stronger, more pleasant to look at, and more influential (DN.27.8 *Agāṇṇa Sutta*).

To the king himself, the Buddha explained that the Tathagata is deep, immeasurable and hard to fathom, and is beyond the description of form, feeling, perception, volitional formations and consciousness (SN.IV.X.1. *Khema*³).

Among the teachers then, the Buddha asserted that he was the greatest because of the supremacy of the Dhamma (his teachings). With the Dhamma, one could become an Arahant who had “destroyed the corruptions, done what had to be done, laid down the burden, attained to the highest goal, completely destroyed the fetter of becoming, and become liberated by the highest insight” (DN.27.31) because

“Dhamma’s the best thing for people
In this life and the next as well.” (DN.27.31⁴)

Even King Pasenadi acknowledged the supremacy of the Sangha and the Buddha by praising the Sangha for leading the perfect and pure holy life, living in concord, looking pleasant, and being well-disciplined. As such, the Buddha could be distinguished as a great teacher and master, deserving more respect than a king. (MN.89 *Dhammacetiya Sutta*⁵).

As the leader of a newly set-up monastic order, Buddha realized that he needed the protection of powerful kings and heads of state. One way of establishing authority was to identify with familiar symbols of spiritual supremacy. During the time of the Buddha in India, the highest of existence was the Brahma. Hence, the Buddha equated himself and his teachings with this symbol of highest existence. As the Buddha became more recognized and distinguished, he asserted the Dhamma (his teachings) above the Brahmanical teachings because of the ability to be liberated from the cycle of rebirths. Hence, the Buddha presented himself above other religious symbols and teachings.

As a *khattiya* and a former prince, the Buddha also distinguished himself above other rulers. The discipline and concordance within his sangha were above all other organizations. Since members of the sangha belonged to all castes and backgrounds, the Buddha proved himself to be a supreme ruler. Hence, he deserved the respect of other

rulers. From the suttas, it became clear that it was commonplace to have kings pay respect to wise sages such as the Buddha, while there were few records of the Buddha paying respect to the rulers. This demonstrated that a wise sage and his retinue had social and religious power. They were also not considered citizens of any particular country, and had freedom to wander from country to country.

Hence, the Buddha asserted his supremacy over other religious groups through his teachings and his governance of the sangha. The Buddha was credible because his sangha was a living proof of the success of his method of governance and his other teachings. In this way, the Buddha was deserving of the respect accorded to him by various powerful leaders.

Humanistic Rule

There were two types of rulers: kings and chiefs of republics. The succession of kings was largely hereditary, unless a war subject one kingdom to another. Chiefs of republics, on the other hand, were elected. In either case, the heads of state had power to determine the living conditions of their subjects. Hence, to both groups, the Buddha delivered many discourses on humanistic rule, in response to questions raised. Righteousness (*dhamma*) was the key to humanistic rule; this meant ruling with virtue and morality.

The Buddha taught righteousness to authoritative kings. While the Buddha did not openly ban wars, he objected to killing and promoted compassion. Buddha recognized that it was the duty of kings to expand their territories and incur the wrath of many enemies. Hence, Buddha's instructed on the conditions for and against wars, defense mechanisms, and behavior of the victor and loser. Buddha taught the use of law and order to protect the inhabitants and to defend against invaders. In the Lakkhana Sutta, the Buddha described the Great Man (*mahapurisa*) who lived the household life as

“wheel-turning righteous monarch of the law, conqueror of the four quarters, who has established the security of his realm ... has more than a thousand sons who are heroes, of heroic stature, conquerors of the hostile army. He dwells having conquered this sea-girt land without stick or sword, by the law.” (DN.30.1⁶)

Where a conquest was made, Buddha held out the following qualities as being essential for the victorious king to remain as lord over the defeated: well-born on both sides for seven generations, rich, had a strong, loyal and alert army, and had wise and able ministers who could judge the future rightly based on past events (AN.V.XIV.134 In every quarter⁷). Equally important was for the defeated to appear strong because enemies rejoiced to see one's grief before misfortune (AN.V.V.49 The Kosalan⁸).

Righteousness was also essential for day-to-day governance. The Buddha held out the Dhamma as the guide for all rulers. For example, in the Agabba Sutta, the term “*raja*” was used for the king who “gladdens others with Dhamma” (DN.27.21). We can also see the importance of the law from the definition of a righteous ruler (*dhammiko dhammaraja*) as one who depended on the Dhamma (honored, revered, cherished and venerated it), protected all inhabitants according to the Dhamma, prevented crime, gave property to those in need, and told ascetics and brahmins to avoid evil and do good (DN.26.4⁹). The righteous king ought to know the good, Dhamma, measure (in punishments and impositions), times (for pleasure, court work, touring) and assembled men (brahmins, nobles) (AN.V.VI.58 The Licchavi young men¹⁰). In order to maintain

law and order, the raja was expected to punish someone who had killed a person, taken what was not given, had intercourse with others' wives or maidens, lied, drunk intoxicants, but not otherwise (AN.V.XVIII.178 Rajahs¹¹).

From the preceding advice to kings, Buddha encouraged a form of humanistic rule based on the Dhamma (righteousness). This was important because kings had immense power as they could determine the welfare of their subjects. Righteousness would determine the fairness of judgments, intensity of punishments, and stability of the society.

To the heads of republic states, the Buddha stressed unity. In the Mahaparinibbana Sutta, Buddha taught that the Vajjians were invulnerable against any attacks from King Ajatasattu because they met regularly and carried out undertakings in concord, enacted nothing not already established and abrogated nothing already enacted, acted in accordance with ancient institutions, honored and supported the elders; did not detain or abduct women, honored and supported shrines, protected and supported the arahants (DN.16.1.4¹²). The Buddha advocated a democratic and righteous form of government.

There were characteristics of government that were common to both kings and heads of republic states. In terms of defense, the Buddha advised the *raja* to provide for a fortress that had deeply embedded pillars, deep and wide moat, a road going around the citadel, armory of spear and sword, large body of troops stationed in the citadel, a clever gate-keeper who refused entrance to strangers, a high and wide rampart covered with plaster, and provisions of food and medicine (AN.VII.VII.63 The citadel¹³).

In order to rule well, the king would need to have the counsel of able men. Hence, the Buddha also taught to enlist a man by his gift – by a kindly word, a good turn and an equal (AN.VIII.III.24 Hatthaka of Alavi (b)¹⁴). The enlistment could be turned into a reality through wealth in the family.

The Buddha gave a variety of advice to political leaders in order to assist them with their job of governance. For monarchical kings, the Buddha advised against wars using weapons, but instead using law and order to protect the citizens domestically as well as against invasions. The king should also train a loyal army and a retinue of wise ministers. A good ruler would look after the welfare of the weak, protect and guard against the violation of the Dhamma. All violators had to be punished according to the Dhamma. For republics, the democratic form of government had to be obeyed, and ancient institutions respected. The atmosphere to be promoted was one of concordance and mutual respect. In this way, it would be invulnerable against attackers. For both types of rulers, it was necessary to strengthen defenses and seek the counsel of wise men. The practical advice of the Buddha was motivated by compassion for the subjects, and promoted a stable environment for the ruler.

Better Rebirths

Another category of advice given by the Buddha related to how leaders could use their power and wealth to accumulate merits. Buddha explained to King Pasenadi that the merits and evil one performs is truly what one owns, and will follow one along like a shadow that does not depart (SN.I.III.1.4 Dear¹⁵). The Buddha warned that even a great king who had attained stable control of the country and who had conquered great territory could not escape from aging and death (SN.I.III.III.24 Simile of Mountain¹⁶).

Hence, the Buddha advised King Pasenadi to live righteously and do wholesome deeds. The Buddha taught that diligence in doing merit would lead to long life, good health, beauty, heavenly rebirth, noble rebirth and a variety of lofty delights (SN.I.III.II.17 Diligence¹⁷). Buddha also taught many methods for accumulating merits with the wealth possessed; this included making himself, family, slaves, workers, servants and friends happy, as well as making offerings to ascetics and Brahmins (SN.I.III.II.19.1 Childless¹⁸).

Buddha also urged the king not to engage in misconduct of body, speech and mind or else he would suffer from lack of internal protection (SN.I.III.1.5 Self-Protected¹⁹). Buddha warned that most people with superior possessions tended to become intoxicated and negligent, yield to greed for sensual pleasures, and mistreat others (SN.I.III.1.6 Few²⁰). An example was Buddha's advice to King Pasenadi who used to consume a "bucket" of rice grains along with soups and curries, a load that was far more than what an ordinary person would need. Hence, Buddha tutored a Brahmin youth a verse that could be recited to the King everyday to help him work on his diet:

“When a man is always mindful,
Knowing moderation in the food he eats,
His ailments then diminish:
He ages slowly, guarding his life.”
(SN.I.III.II.13.402 A Bucket Measure of Food²¹)

A consequence of extravagance could be found in the Dantabhumi Sutta, where Prince Jayasena, son of King Bimbisara, could not believe that a bhikkhu who was diligent, ardent and resolute could achieve unification of the mind. The Buddha explained that a prince living in the midst of sensual pleasures could not realize that which could only be known through renunciation, just like a person whose view was obstructed by a mountain (a simile for ignorance).

During the time of the Buddha, the belief in rebirths was already ingrained. Buddha taught that better rebirths could be attained through the accumulation of good merits and the avoidance of evil. Also, the law of cause and effect assured that even in the current life, a person could acquire longevity, good health and beauty by doing the same. The largest obstacle for the wealthy and powerful was greed and anger, which would lead to ignorance. Hence, Buddha taught political leaders moderation. This set of advice led to personal well-being for rulers, which would in turn lead to well-being of the inhabitants.

Liberation

The last category of advice offered by the Buddha pertained to practice that could lead to liberation. While the previous category of advice was more practical for lay persons seeking better rebirths (whether in the human or heavenly realms), this set of advice were generally questions from kings and princes to clarify doubts regarding the homeless (sangha) life. For example, in a discourse with Prince Bodhi, son of King Udena of Kosambi, the Buddha was asked the period of time needed to train under the Tathagata in order to reach liberation. The Buddha used this opportunity to teach the five factors of striving needed for anyone seeking enlightenment: possessed faith in the Tathagata's enlightenment, free from illness and affliction, honest and sincere, energetic in abandoning unwholesome states and undertaking wholesome states, and wise in understanding the rise and disappearance that would lead to complete destruction of

suffering (MN.85 To Prince Bodhi²²). The Buddha then went on to say that the time period for attaining liberation became immaterial once one possessed these factors of striving.

To Prince Abhaya, son of King Bimbisara, Buddha offered his teachings when asked whether the lack of knowledge and vision had any cause and condition. The Buddha clarified that the hindrances (sensual lust, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and remorse, and doubt) were the causes for one lacking in knowledge and vision. On the other hand, enlightenment factors (mindfulness based on seclusion, dispassion, cessation and maturation in release) were the causes for knowledge and vision (SN.V.II.VI.56 Abhaya²³).

After the Buddha had entered parinibbana, Ananda corrected the impression that Vassakara, minister of Magadha, had regarding meditation. Ananda clarified that the Buddha only praised meditation that was secluded from sensual pleasures, unwholesome states so that the bhikkhu could reach the first jhana; the stilling of applied and sustained thought to enter the second jhana; the fading away of rapture to enter the third jhana, and the abandoning of pleasure and pain to enter the fourth jhana (MN.108 With Gopaka Moggallana²⁴).

The Buddha did not persuade political leaders to seek liberation by joining the monastic community. Instead, most of his teachings were directed at clarifying doubts that leaders had regarding the homeless life. Through such opportunities, the Buddha taught the factors that prevented one from achieving liberation, as well as the factors that could enable one to attain liberation from the cycle of rebirths.

In the four Nikayas, there were 64 discourses with political leaders and 32 teachings that referred to political leaders. The recurrent themes of establishing credibility, humanistic rule, merits for better rebirths, and method of liberation were prevalent in most of the discourses. Buddha consistently taught that the wealthy and powerful should not abuse their assets, but instead should use their assets to benefit their subjects. Buddha also taught political leaders not to indulge in sensual pleasures, to the detriment of themselves and their governance.

Methods

The Buddha employed various skillful methods in order to teach political leaders. Commonly used were similes, examples, logical reasoning and narratives.

A simile is a figure of speech that compares unlike objects. The Buddha often used similes to assist his audience comprehend his teachings. For example, in the Rathavineta Sutta, the seven stages of purification were likened to seven relay chariots taking Pasenadi from the town of Savatthi to Saketa (MN.24 The Relay Chariots²⁵). Examples and counter-examples were also used to help the political leaders. When asked if a bad man could discern a good from a bad person, the Buddha gave the example of rajah Eleyya and retinue who showed respect to Rama's son, the recluse, while brahmin Todeyya did not (AN.IV.XIX.187 Vassakara²⁶). Through this set of example and counter-example, the Buddha demonstrated that only someone who had attained a certain level of wisdom could discern the good from the bad. Political leaders were generally better-educated, and hence, could be persuaded by reason. In the Bhumija Sutta, Prince Jayasena was led to deduce that the wrong method, even with the right aspiration, would not lead to the attainment of the holy fruit (MN.126 Bhumija²⁷).

Another method used in the discourses was through narratives, such as past life stories. For example, when asked about the conditions leading to the childless and pathetic situation of a financier who had just passed away, Buddha narrated his past lives to convince King Pasenadi that he should use his wealth for maximum benefit (SN.I.III.II.20 Childless 2²⁸).

Hence, the method of instruction used by the Buddha was lively and varied.

Conclusion

During the lifetime of the Buddha, various political leaders had sought his counsel, for matters ranging from whether to wage an attack to the benefits of leading a homeless life, and from personal well-being to social welfare. In all instances, the Buddha recommended strategies that led to peace and prosperity for the individuals and to the country. The Buddha advised the rich and powerful to share their assets with others and be humanitarian towards criminals, thereby accumulating merits for themselves in the process. The Buddha also explained the spiritual wealth in leading the homeless life. In many ways, the Buddha established the supremacy of himself and his teachings, thereby gaining the deserved respect of political leaders.

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Notes

¹ Sixteen great countries were listed in the Anguttara Nikaya: Aṅga, Magadha, Kāci, Kosala, Vṛji (Vajji), Malla, Cedi, Vatsa (Vansa or Vaccha), Kuru, Pācala, Matsya (Maccha), Curasena, Acvaka or Acmaka (Assaka), Avanti, Gandhara and Kamboja (Majumdar 110). The 4 most powerful were: Kosala, Vatsa, Magadha and Avanti. (Majumdar 114).

² (Rhys Davids 81)

³ (Bodhi 1381-82)

⁴ (Walshe 415)

⁵ (Bāṇamoli and Bodhi 730-33)

⁶ (Walshe 441)

⁷ (Hare 2001, 116)

⁸ (Hare 2001, 47)

⁹ (Walshe 397)

¹⁰ (Hare 2001, 113)

¹¹ (Hare 2001, 153-54)

¹² (Walshe 232)

¹³ (Hare 1996, 70-71)

¹⁴ (Hare 1996, 148)

¹⁵ (Bodhi 168)

¹⁶ (Bodhi 192)

¹⁷ (Bodhi 179-80)

¹⁸ (Bodhi 183)

¹⁹ (Bodhi 169)

²⁰ (Bodhi 169)

²¹ (Bodhi 176)

²² (Bāṇamoli and Bodhi 707)

²³ (Bodhi 1616)

²⁴ (Bāṇamoli and Bodhi 885-86)

²⁵ (Banamoli and Bodhi 64)

²⁶ (Woodward 187-88)

²⁷ (Banamoli and Bodhi 1000)

²⁸ (Bodhi 184)