Buddhist Theravada Concept towards the Political

Ven. Tilawka*

Yangon University of Distance Education, Myanmar.

Corresponding Author Email: vilawka.1988@gmail.com*

Cite: Tilawka. (2021). Buddhist Theravada Concept towards the Political. *Journal of Dhamma for Life*, 27(4), 1-14.

Abstract

The article have an objective to study Buddhist Theravada concept towards the political. Buddhist social philosophy is involving with brief, presented a systematic and functional framework for fashioning a pattern of social relations that was attuned to the needs and demands of the new social milieu, especially the political culture of the rising 'new middle class' at the time of the Buddha. A distinctive feature of the monastic community, over and above the social and moral dimension of Buddhist practice, was its rules and procedures for the management of the monastic community. The monastic community was governed and regulated by a well-formulated code of conduct or the Vinaya, which formed an integral part of the Buddhist Compendium, enumerating the rules and procedures governing the structure and functioning of the monastic community.

Keywords: Buddhist; Theravada; Concept; Political

1. Introduction

The concept of a 'religion' is generally associated with a comprehensive set of beliefs and concepts about the nature of the ultimate reality that gives meaning and purpose to the lives of those who adhere to a particular faith. On these grounds, it could be well argued that Buddhism too warrants being identified as a religion. Looked at

วารสารธรรมเพื่อชีวิต ปีที่ 27 ฉบับที่ 4 (ตุลาคม-ธันวาคม 2564)
Journal of Dhamma for Life Vol. 27 No. 4 (October-December 2021)

2

historically, Buddhism outlined 'a far-reaching and original' compendium of ideas, a religion-philosophical system, which was 'subversive of the religion of the day' (Rhys Davids 1896: 76). For this reason, some maintain that Buddhism was essentially an Indian system 'which grew out of the intellectual work of [the Buddha's] predecessors' (Rhys Davids 1896: 76).

Buddhist teachings were formulated at a time of profound social and economic change and turmoil in Indian society. This era of early Indian history was marked by new forms of social and economic relations built around trade and agriculture and was closely associated with the rise of urbanism and a new mercantile community (Thapar, 2002). The new social order now included an increasingly dominant group, the new rich 'middle class' of landowning farmers and merchants, many of whom were the chief patrons of Buddhism. These patrons of the Buddha were imbued with a spirit of individualism bordering on selfishness, which not only challenged the orthodoxy of the Brahmin social order but also presented an intellectual and philosophical challenge to the Buddha. However, this Buddhist thinking sat uneasily in the context of the social and political institutions of traditional society, grounded in an institutional fabric based on a caste-based society (*varna-jati*) linked to the Vedas.

2. Political Culture on Buddhist Perspective

The emergent social order reacted strongly against the rigidity and the dominance of a culture that denied individual autonomy, human freedoms, and legitimated inequalities. In particular, the new urban mercantilism rejected this hierarchical ordering of society in terms of a divinely ordained sacrosanct social structure made up of four social classes Kshatriya, brahmins, Vaishya, and Sudras (nobles, brahmins, traders and work people, and the outcasts). What we see here is the extent to which Buddhist ideas and their philosophical rationale endeavored to cater to the needs and interests of an agrarian/trade-oriented society in a new more urban/secular social environment. The Buddha virtually became the spokesperson of the new urban-based merchant class in

rejecting Brahmin orthodox, particularly the religious justification of social inequalities arising from the status ordering of human relations. Interestingly, the Buddha's preference for a more open society was characteristic of what prevailed in the smaller tribal oligarchies (Gana sangha or clan republics) than the larger monarchical kingdoms (Kosala and Magadha). The smaller tribal oligarchies or confederacies, particularly the Vajjian confederacy, proved to be a fertile catchment for the Buddha. According to Ghosal (1959), the functional and utilitarian social practices of the Vajjian clan republics in promoting happiness and prosperity were imbued with a sense of public spirit, pragmatic forms of governance, and moral rectitude. This more open liberal political culture which also included respect for elders, women, and holy persons, was more congenial and receptive to the teachings of the Buddha.

Although it turned out, the Buddha, by acting in close accord with groups such as the Vajjians, was cast not just as a religious teacher with a new philosophy, but a social critic, a revolutionary social theorist. The Buddha was, indeed, a social reformer, reminiscent of Martin Luther in Christendom, who dared to challenge the Brahmin orthodoxy on such issues as an omnipotent creator or a divinely revealed social and political order. Assuming that both the Roman Catholic Church and Brahmanism are 'sacrificial systems' which 'places the essence of religion in sacrifices' (Clarke 1869: 715), Buddhism, by stimulating 'a process of self-cleansing (Chaitanya 1975: 89) bears comparison with Protestantism arising out of Catholicism. This led many early students of Buddhism in the late 19th century to characterize Buddhism as the 'Protestantism of the East' (Clarke 1869) in that Buddhism was seen as a 'critic and complement to the reigning orthodox of Brahminism' (Deakin 1893).

This led some scholars to regard Buddhism simply as a variant of the classical Hindu Vedantic tradition because 'in all essentials, Buddhism and Brahmanism form a single system' (Coomaraswamy 1964: 221). Accordingly, Hindu scholars often cast the Buddha as an Avatar, an incarnate of the God Vishnu who only sought to bring about a

reformation of Brahmin religious practices such as those about sacrificial rites. In rejecting these interpretation others such as the Dalit theorists regard Buddhism as an independent moral and social philosophy. These theorists see Buddhism as offering a more liberal and humanistic alternative to the classical Vedantic tradition associated with Brahmanism, one which offered a far more radical and revolutionary creed of social conduct (Omvedt, 2005).

3. Philosophy and Political Concept

The philosophy and political ideas which evolved during the reign of Emperor Asoka (208 BCE - 239 BCE), heavily influenced by Buddhist ideas, sought to challenge the orthodoxy of Indian social and political theorizing (Ling, 1973; Thapar, 2002). The classical theory of statecraft in early India was based on the Vedas and included such notions as the divine origin of rulers, the absolute power of the monarch, and the superiority of the upper caste the Brahmins. These ideas, characteristic of Hindu philosophy, were well documented in Hindu mythology in such works as the Ramayana and Mahabharatha (Jayasuriya, 1997). Later, during the reign of Chandragupta (Asoka's grandfather) these Brahminic ideas of politics and statecraft were given formal expression in the writings of the influential political theorist, Kautilya around the 3rd century (see his magnum opus, the Arhtasastra). A central feature of Kautilya's political philosophy was the justification offered for a monarch's absolute power and authority including the use of coercion and violence in matters of governance.

The art of government for Kautilya rested primarily, but not exclusively on the exercise of force for the pursuit of material interests and also the maintenance of order (Armojanad, 1993). As a political theorist, Kautilya was very much in the mold of a Machiavelli for whom might or what was expedient was right (Jayatilleke, 1967). This political credo stood in sharp contrast to the implicit theory and practice of the Buddhist approach to statecraft which was based on the wheel of moral righteousness and

singularly based on nonviolence. This was what subsequently influenced Asoka in his approach to governance which was inspired by Buddhist notions of social and political theory (Ling, 1973). A later Mahayana text (Ariyasatya Parivarta Sutta) not only commends the avoidance of war and violence but also encourages the resort to negotiations and strong alliances in matters of conflict resolution (Harvey, 2000).

But, barring a few notable exceptions (e.g., the work of Jayatilleke, 1967), the Buddhist attitude to politics received scant mention in the Buddhist literature, as well as the scholarly work of political theorists. This lacunae of Buddhist scholarship have, however, been rectified by the recent work of a new breed of scholars associated with the Dalits in India (Omvedt, 2005). Foremost among these is the political scientist, Kancha Ilaiah (2002) who has carved out a new territory of Buddhist scholarship by emphasizing the 'this-worldly' rationalistic nature of Buddhist philosophy. This new Buddhist scholarship documents lucidly the extent to which the Buddha has strong claims to be regarded as a 'political philosopher' in addition to being an original religious thinker (Omvedt, 2001). This mode of theorizing, contrary to scholars such as Max Weber (1966), stands in sharp contrast to the widely held view that Buddhism is primarily an 'other worldly' religion concerned with personal salvation (Gombrich & Obeysekera 1988; Queen & King, 1996). By contrast, the Buddha, as portrayed by Ilaiah (2002) and others, stands out not only as a great social reformer but also as a political thinker (if not a 'political philosopher') who sought to 'reform and humanize the mercantile economy, the patriarchal family and the monarchical state by challenging of Brahminical political theorists' (Omvedt, 2001). Admittedly, the claim that the Buddha was a 'political philosopher' remains a contested issue mainly because there is no clear evidence that the Buddha attempted to develop an explicit political philosophy or to formulate a distinct form of political practice. The consensus is that the Buddha's teachings (the dhamma), without necessarily formerly outlining a political philosophy in abstract terms,

วารสารธรรมเพื่อชีวิต
Journal of Dhamma for Life

วารสารธรรมเพื่อชีวิต ปีที่ 27 ฉบับที่ 4 (ตุลาคม-ธันวาคม 2564)
Journal of Dhamma for Life Vol. 27 No. 4 (October-December 2021)

6

nevertheless contained profound insights of a social and political nature (Ling 1981a, 1985). The political dimension of Buddhist teachings though not systematically formulated as in the exposition of Buddhist philosophy and psychology, the Abhidhamma (Jayasuriya, 1963; Gethin, 1998) is best understood as an offshoot of the more well-formulated expositions of Buddhist social and moral philosophy set out to accompany what was essentially an ethic of 'human liberation' (Swaris 1999). The exposition relating to a Buddhist social philosophy may be readily discerned primarily from four discourses portraying the kind of society that is morally acceptable and logically defensible in terms of the fundamental tenets of Buddhism. All these normative prescriptions are framed within a spirit of scientific humanism and commended to those who wish to govern in accord with the Buddhist teachings and abiding by the 'Middle Way.'

Buddhist social philosophy, in brief, presented a systematic and functional framework for fashioning a pattern of social relations that was attuned to the needs and demands of the new social milieu, especially the political culture of the rising 'new middle class' at the time of the Buddha (Thapar 2002; Swaris 1999). In these circumstances, the Buddha sought to restrain the growing spirit of individualism characteristic of this social climate by proposing a more ethical and humane way of characterizing the place of the individual in society. This, among other considerations, included a concern for others and acceptance of difference, for instance, in the positive attitudes to social differentiation of 'race' or caste (Malalasekera and Jayatilleke 1958). This way of thinking was also reflected in the Buddhist attitudes towards other religions which showed a greater willingness to accept other faiths (Jayatilleke, 1975). Confronted with the religious pluralism of the times, the Buddha readily acknowledged 'every form of [rival religious beliefs] as a possessor of some degree of Truth' (Pratt, 1928; Jayatilleke, 1975).

4. Governance and the State on Buddhist Concept

วารสารธรรมเพื่อชีวิต ปีที่ 27 ฉบับที่ 4 (ตุลาคม-ธันวาคม 2564)
Journal of Dhamma for Life Vol. 27 No. 4 (October-December 2021)

7

Buddhism or Buddhism (Pali: buddhasasana with spring's Sasna, Sanskrit: buddhasasana Buddhist) religion with Buddha as a prophet. Preaching enlightenment as Buddha himself taught as an important doctrine, Buddhist monks formed a community of religious leaders to educate and seek adherence to the teachings of the Buddha.

Many of the crucial features of the Buddhist approach to social philosophy and political governance derive from the principles and practices governing the organization of the monastic community (the sangha). A distinctive feature of the monastic community, over and above the social and moral dimension of Buddhist practice, was its rules and procedures for the management of the monastic community. The monastic community was governed and regulated by a well-formulated code of conduct or the Vinaya, which formed an integral part of the Buddhist Compendium, enumerating the rules and procedures governing the structure and functioning of the monastic community.

According to this mode of governance, the brotherhood of monks (sangha and later nuns) was established on 'democratic foundations with a constitution and code of law governing their conduct' (Jayatilleke 1967). The day-to-day affairs of the sangha were governed by a liberal culture of equalitarian inter-personal relations. There was no formal hierarchy or dynastic favoritism in the monastic order. It was not social status but other characteristics such as the seniority of a monk, determined by the date of ordination. That guided inter-personal relations within the community. The Buddha's son when ordained as a monk took his place in the monastic community according to seniority.

The monastic code of conduct stipulates that the individual life of a monk is immersed in a Brotherhood a community of persons ideally seeking liberation from greed, hatred, delusion, folly, conceit, and ignorance and living in communal harmony, with communal property and a bare minimum of one's private material possessions. In addition to pursuing the spiritual needs of the monastic order, the monastic code specifically

วารสารธรรมเพื่อชีวิต ปีที่ 27 ฉบับที่ 4 (ตุลาคม-ธันวาคม 2564)
Journal of Dhamma for Life Vol. 27 No. 4 (October-December 2021)

8

indicates that the sangha has a responsibility towards the wider society of lay persons who cater or assist the community in meeting their daily needs. In short, there was a deep sense of social responsibility, caring, and compassion underlying the mutually constituted relationship between the monks and lay followers. This form of monastic governance contained many features of statecraft present in the self-governing confederacies and republic rather than the large monarchical kingdoms of the North, such as Kosala and Magadha. Whereas the monarchical kingdoms were guided by Brahmanic notions of a divinely sanctioned superior class of rulers, the self-governing confederacies had much in common with the logic of the humanistic Buddhist ethic. For instance, it is reported that on one occasion the Buddha exhorted the citizens of the republic of Licchavis or Vajjis of Vasili who were threatened by a rampaging aggressive monarch (Ajatasatru) from one of the large kingdoms to act prudently and skillfully using more democratic forms of conflict resolution. The Buddha suggested to the republics that if they wished to maintain their independence they should strengthen their more democratic forms of governance. These include holding regular and frequent assemblies to discuss affairs of state collectively with each other, endeavoring to carry out the day-to-day tasks of governance in harmony, and paying due heed to established practices and customs (Mishra 2004). This normative code of conduct included the primacy attached to human freedoms and the equality of all human beings was more characteristic of governance in the self-governing confederacies. The principle of equality in Buddhism applied equally to the relationship between the ruler and the ruled and was a governing principle in matters of statecraft.

The Kalama Sutta or the Charter of Free Inquiry (Bhikku Soma, 1963) drew pointed attention to the importance of rational thought, which preceded the European Enlightenment by many centuries. This also led to the Buddha being labeled in some quarters as a 'skeptic' for adopting a non-dogmatic cautious attitude governed by reason. Some like Batchelor (1997), characterize Buddhism as an agnostic faith, and Sen (2005)

even regards agnosticism as a 'foundational characteristic of Buddhism.' This form of governance was conducive to maintaining a plurality of discourse, more akin to the Socratic method of dialogue than the prevalent prescriptive doctrinaire approach of the Brahmanical code. The underlying logic and rationale of governance were that it was a form of 'deliberative democracy' which was participatory and permitted accommodating differences of opinion and even dissent without imposing majoritarian decision-making principles. Irreconcilable dissent as that which occurred at meetings of the several Councils of the monastic fraternity (e.g., at the Third Council during the reign of Asoka) led to an amicable agreement to differ and the formation of different sects.

However, this 'radical egalitarianism' (Swaris, 1995) and the idea of equality in a universal community became somewhat problematic concerning the issue of gender equity that arose on the question of the ordination of women as nuns. This was most apparent when the Buddha took some time in agreeing to admit women into the monastic order, and, had to be persuaded by Ananda, one of his trusted disciples. He agreed to their reasoned arguments but with some conditions attached, namely, that nuns will agree to abide by additional rules which did not apply to the order of monks. In accepting 'women as spiritual equals,' the Buddha, while not discounting the fact that their social role was culturally prescribed, still provided women with avenues of self-expression. The fact that 'the Buddha is often seen as the most enlightened classical philosopher on the role of women' (Coomaraswamy, 1984: 80), testifies to the Buddha's pragmatism in his willingness to entertain and consider rationally dissenting points of view more generally on such questions as the role of women in the monastic order. This flows from the Buddhist philosophical stance that 'thought is not an absolute command or necessity but a pragmatic call to recognize the empirical existence and adopt solutions to whatever problems associated with it' (Kalupahana, 1995: 45) in accord with the moral code. Here

วารสารธรรมเพื่อชีวิต ปีที่ 27 ฉบับที่ 4 (ตุลาคม-ธันวาคม 2564)
Journal of Dhamma for Life Vol. 27 No. 4 (October-December 2021)

10

again, we note the remarkable commonality between the modes of governance of the monastic community and the self-governing republics.

Furthermore, the liberal and humane culture of the clan republics was mutually supportive of the monastic community as they were more inclined to a 'democratic' non-authoritarian style of governance, characterized by such features as regard for majority opinions in decision making, regular meetings to conduct affairs of state, etc. There is no doubt that the more liberal political culture of the gana sanghas or tribal republics was central in formulating the nature and character of the monastic community as a social organization. Overall there is no doubt that this model of governance was attuned to the needs of peace and harmony in a small community to maintain long-term stability and continuity as a well-knit social organization.

To this end, the Buddha gave pride of place to communal deliberation, face-to-face negotiation, regular meetings of the community, and encouragement to engage in free and frank discussion. Given the value placed on reason and rational thought, the consensus was to be achieved by a process of reasoned choice rather than a blind belief in a prescriptive code. There was a consensus in collective decision-making arrived at in accord with the 'Constitution' of the Community, its code of conduct rules, conventions, and form of practice. At least within the monastic community, a strong ethos of debate and discussion amongst equals was recognized. In an oft-quoted text (the Kalama Sutta), the Buddha advises those with doubts about the truth to discover the truth themselves by a process of the Asoka Model of Statecraft the Buddhist model of monastic governance was destined to have a profound impact on social and political thought in Asia, especially in Buddhist countries like Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand. This legacy was transmitted through Emperor Asoka with his core Buddhist ideas, principles, and practices being the template for formulating his unique form of political governance embodying a code of secular law. The rationale for Emperor Asoka's model of governance, though primarily

วารสารธรรมเพื่อชีวิต
Journal of Dhamma for Life

วารสารธรรมเพื่อชีวิต ปีที่ 27 ฉบับที่ 4 (ตุลาคม-ธันวาคม 2564)
Journal of Dhamma for Life Vol. 27 No. 4 (October-December 2021)

11

inspired by Buddhist practices, also bore the impact of the historical legacy of modes of governance inherited mainly from the self-governing confederacies or tribal republics. These democratic principles of governance, for instance, were enunciated in the Vajjian constitution and included a detailed exposition of the structure, and mode of operation of the Vajjian judicial system. At the time of the Ashoka Empire Buddhism was not just a religious belief system but also 'a social and intellectual movement influencing many aspects of social life' (Thapar 2002: 200). Asoka's concept of the Dhamma often used as

> "A synonym for Buddhism … was aimed at creating an attitude of mind in which the ethical behavior of one person towards another was primary and was based on a recognition of the dimity of human beings. (Thapar, 2002: 201)

These influences were also evident much later in the social and political climate of India particularly during the Mauryan era (321-185 BCE). As a consequence, the ideals of democracy manifest in Buddhist social and political philosophy were seen as the best form of governance to the extent that it generated 'principles of statecraft denoting a democratic welfare state' (Jayatilleke 1967: 81), mainly embodied in terms of a specific understanding of kingship. Contrary to the prevailing idea of a divinely ordained monarch, the idea of a king as a chosen leader, it was argued, has arisen historically as a social contract. Accordingly, the people by mutual agreement selected one person as the 'the king' in the hope that he could be relied on to maintain law and order, and social harmony.

Buddhism as a philosophy of democracy laid down democratic principles as follows, (Wangfaikeaw, 2011)

1) Before his death Buddha laid down the principles for living in the book we call "The Book of Discipline".

วารสารธรรมเพื่อชีวิต
Journal of Dhamma for Life

วารสารธรรมเพื่อชีวิต ปีที่ 27 ฉบับที่ 4 (ตุลาคม-ธันวาคม 2564)
Journal of Dhamma for Life Vol. 27 No. 4 (October-December 2021)

12

2) Buddhism advocates the "middle way" which is the policy of sufficiency advocated by his Royal highness where greed is shunned and poverty is seen as a situation to be remedied.

3) Buddha saw the problems caused by the caste system where people were condemned because of their birthright and taught that the scavenger was as worthy of respect as anyone. This is a true principle of democracy

4) Buddhist monks have rights under discipline. Such as local priests will be entitled to the distribution of pre-Buddhist visitors. The temple priests were entitled to the distribution of the respective years. Receive Katin and benefit in seeking a four-month winter robe equality. There is much more freedom to go to the temple of any discrimination of any meditation.

5) The division of powers Thera adult acting administrative groups. The canonical discipline Buddha himself ordained as a Buddhist monk, who then commanded the investigations discipline. The case decided by the disciplinary function of the law is unfair discipline.

5. Conclusion

The concept of political has long believed in the fundamentals of Buddha's real teachings, which encompass the essence of all major religions and ideologies and serve as the bedrock of a democratic society. Individuals must have freedom within the norms, values, and regulations of the society in which they live, as well as the ability to have their voices heard and counted. The problem for governments is to live up to that ideal, representing the people rather than their own or secular interests. Although the precept appears to be absolute in its opposition to politics, there are further caveats within Theravada Buddhism. The ethical expectations that a politician must meet are not the same as those that citizens must meet.

วารสารธรรมเพื่อชีวิต ปีที่ 27 ฉบับที่ 4 (ตุลาคม-ธันวาคม 2564)
Journal of Dhamma for Life Vol. 27 No. 4 (October-December 2021)

13

6. Reference

Armojanad. (1993). Said Amir, ed. The political dimensions of religion. Suny Press.

Batchelor. (1997). The Awakening of the West: The Encounter of Buddhism and Western Culture. London: Riverhead. Batchelor, S. Buddhism Without Beliefs. London: Riverhead.

Bhikku Soma. (1963). The Buddhist layman's code of discipline. Buddhist Publication Society Kandy, Sri Lanka.

Chaitanya. (1975). Teachings of Lord Caitanya (1975). Srila Prabhupada's Books. India.

Clarke, M. (1869). The Peripatetic Philosopher. G. Robertson.

Coomaraswamy, R. (1984). The Post-Conciliar Rite of Holy Orders. Studies in Comparative Religion, 16, 154-87.

Deakin, A. (1893). Irrigated India, an Australian view of India and Ceylon: their irrigation and agriculture. W. Thacker and Company.

Gethin, R. (1998). The foundations of Buddhism. OUP Oxford.

Gombrich & Obeysekera. (1988). Cite In. Hettiarachchi, N. (2017). Role of Buddhist Monks in the Post-Conflict Reconciliation Process: The Case of Sri Lanka. University of Ruhuna.

Harvey. (2000). Peter. An introduction to Buddhist ethics: Foundations, values and issues. Cambridge University Press

Jayasuriya. (1963). Buddhism, politics, and statecraft. International Journal of Buddhist Thought and Culture, 11, 41-74.

Jayatilleke. (1967). K.N. The Buddhist Attitude to Other Religions. Wheel Publication no.216 Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society.

Kalupahana, D. J. (1995). Ethics in early Buddhism. University of Hawaii Press.

Kancha Ilaiah. (2002). Development of Muslims: Comparing Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh in the early 2000s. Economic and Political Weekly, 74-76.

Ling, E. A., Paterson, J. A., Privat, A., Mori, S., & Leblond, C. P. (1973). Investigation of glial cells in semithin sections. I. Identification of glial cells in the brain of young rats. Journal of Comparative Neurology, 149(1), 43-71.Malalasekera and Jayatilleke. (1958).

Mishra. (2004). The End of Suffering. New York: Farrar, Stauss and Giroux.

Omvedt, G. (2001). The Buddha as a Political Philosopher.

Queen, C. S., & King, S. B. (Eds.). (1996). *Engaged buddhism: buddhist liberation movements in Asia.* SUNY Press.

Rhys Davids. (1896). trans. Sangama Sutta: A Battle (2). Samyutta Nikaya: The Grouped Discourses. Access to Insight: Readings in Theravāda Buddhism.

Swaris. (1995). Review by Melissa Parke'. Asia-Pacific Journal on Human Rights and the Law, 2(1), 143-156.

Thapar. (2002). Thapar, R. The Penguin History of Early India: From the Origin to AD 1300. London: Penguin.

Wangfaikeaw, K. (2011). The concept of democracy as perceived by parents as a form of Buddhism. Political Buddhist. Bangkok: MCU Press.