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The King as a Dharmaraja: Buddhist Perspectives on Righteous Rule and Patronage

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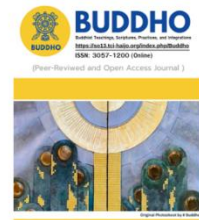
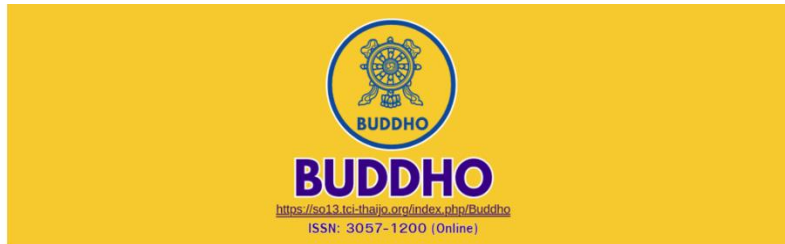


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The King as a Dharmaraja: Buddhist Perspectives on Righteous Rule and Patronage

Phra Kitiphat Khongmun*

Abstract

The concept of the Dharmaraja (righteous king) plays a significant role in Buddhist political thought, emphasizing the monarch's duty to rule according to the principles of Dhamma (Dharma). Rooted in Buddhist texts such as the Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta, Dasavidha-Rājadhamma, and the edicts of Emperor Ashoka, this ideal envisions the king as a protector and promoter of righteousness, ensuring the welfare of his people through moral governance and patronage of the Sangha. This article explores the historical and doctrinal dimensions of the Dharmaraja concept, analyzing its influence on Buddhist kingship across different regions, including India, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia. By examining scriptural references and historical case studies, this study highlights how Buddhist rulers have legitimized their authority through ethical leadership and the support of Buddhist institutions. Additionally, the article discusses the continuing relevance of the Dharmaraja ideal in modern Buddhist societies.

Keywords: Buddhist, Economics, Thailand, Sustainable

Introduction

Throughout Buddhist history, the concept of righteous kingship has been central to political and religious thought. Unlike secular rulers, a Dharmaraja is expected to govern in accordance with Dhamma, ensuring social harmony, justice, and the prosperity of his people (Tambiah, 1976). The Buddhist notion of kingship

is not merely about governance but about the moral and spiritual responsibility of a ruler to uphold the Sāsana (Buddhist teachings). The Dasavidha-Rājadharmma (Ten Royal Virtues) outlines the ethical framework a Buddhist ruler should follow, including generosity (dāna), moral conduct (sīla), self-sacrifice (pariccāga), and wisdom (paññā) (Rahula, 1993).

The historical precedent for the Dharmaraja is often traced to Emperor Ashoka (3rd century BCE), whose reign exemplifies the integration of Buddhist values with political authority. His patronage of the Sangha, construction of stupas, and promotion of nonviolence and religious tolerance serve as a model for later Buddhist rulers across Asia (Strong, 1983). Similar ideals shaped the governance of kings in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, and Cambodia, where Buddhist monarchs assumed the role of protectors of the faith, reinforcing their legitimacy through religious merit-making and state-sponsored Buddhist institutions (Gombrich, 1988; Skilling, 2007).

This article aims to examine the concept of Dharmaraja from both textual and historical perspectives, addressing key questions: How do Buddhist scriptures define the ideal Buddhist ruler? What were the historical manifestations of this concept in different Buddhist cultures? And to what extent is the Dharmaraja ideal relevant in contemporary Buddhist societies? By exploring these themes, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the intersection between Buddhism, kingship, and ethical governance.

The Historical Precedent for the Dharmaraja: Emperor Ashoka

The concept of Dharmaraja finds one of its most profound historical manifestations in the reign of Emperor Ashoka (r. 268–232 BCE), whose rule over the Mauryan Empire significantly influenced Buddhist political thought. Prior to his transformation into a Buddhist ruler, Ashoka was known for his military conquests, particularly the Kalinga War, which resulted in large-scale destruction and loss of life (Strong, 1983). The suffering caused by the war reportedly led to Ashoka's deep remorse, ultimately prompting his conversion to Buddhism and a commitment to governance based on Dhamma (Thapar, 1997).

Ashoka's transformation from a conqueror to a Dharmaraja is well-documented in the Ashokan Edicts, a series of inscriptions on pillars and rock surfaces across the Indian subcontinent (Guruge, 1993). These edicts provide valuable insight into how he sought to implement Buddhist principles in governance, promoting nonviolence (ahimsa), religious tolerance, moral

righteousness, and social welfare (Strong, 1983; Thapar, 1997). For example, in the Rock Edict XIII, Ashoka explicitly renounces military aggression and emphasizes moral conquest (Dhamma-Vijaya) as the highest form of victory (Thapar, 1997).

Critically, while Ashoka's reign is celebrated as a model of Buddhist kingship, some scholars argue that his approach to governance was not purely Buddhist but rather an adaptation of Mauryan political strategy with ethical and religious elements (Gombrich, 1988). Ashoka's Dhamma was a moral and ethical code that extended beyond Buddhism, incorporating Hindu and Jain elements to foster inclusivity (Skilling, 2007). Moreover, some historians question the extent of Ashoka's actual influence on later Buddhist rulers, noting that while his inscriptions survive, his political model did not persist in later Indian dynasties (Strong, 1983).

Nevertheless, Ashoka remains a powerful symbol of the Dharmaraja ideal. His patronage of the Sangha, construction of Buddhist monuments such as the Sanchi Stupa, and sponsorship of the Third Buddhist Council significantly shaped the institutionalization of Buddhism (Guruge, 1993). Furthermore, Ashoka's diplomatic efforts—sending Buddhist emissaries to Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, and even as far as the Hellenistic kingdoms—underscore his role in spreading Buddhism as a universal ethical system rather than a localized religious tradition (Gombrich, 1988).

The Relevance of the Dharmaraja Ideal in Contemporary Buddhist Societies

The Dharmaraja ideal continues to be symbolically and politically significant in many contemporary Buddhist societies, particularly in Thailand, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and Myanmar, where Buddhist kingship has historically played a role in state formation and national identity. However, the modern political landscape presents both challenges and reinterpretations of this ideal.

In Thailand, the concept of the Dhammaraja (King as Upholder of Dhamma) remains deeply embedded in the monarchy. The Thai constitution upholds the king as the protector of Buddhism, reinforcing his moral authority in national governance (Keyes, 2016). The late King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX) was often portrayed as a modern Dharmaraja, engaging in Buddhist practices and promoting social welfare projects in accordance with Dasavidha-Rājadhamma (Ten Royal Virtues) (Keyes, 2016). However, critics argue that this ideal has also been used to legitimize political power and suppress dissent, as seen in the role of Buddhist nationalism in shaping state policies (Skilling, 2007).

In Sri Lanka, the connection between Buddhism and political authority has been a subject of both reverence and controversy. The Mahavamsa chronicle, which legitimizes Buddhist kingship, has historically influenced Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism (Gombrich & Obeyesekere, 1988). This association has contributed to policies that prioritize Buddhism in national governance, sometimes at the expense of ethnic and religious minorities (Deegalle, 2006). The use of Buddhist kingship as a political tool, particularly in shaping post-colonial nationalist movements, demonstrates both the enduring power and potential risks of the Dharmaraja concept in contemporary governance (Deegalle, 2006).

In contrast, Bhutan presents a modern adaptation of the Dharmaraja ideal through its philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH). Rooted in Buddhist principles, GNH integrates spirituality, governance, and sustainable development as a framework for national progress (Ura et al., 2012). The Bhutanese monarchy, while maintaining a Buddhist identity, has gradually moved towards a constitutional democracy, reflecting a modernized interpretation of righteous rule rather than absolute kingship (Ura et al., 2012).

Myanmar provides another complex case. While the Burmese kings historically modeled themselves as Dharmarajas, the military regime that ruled the country for decades also sought legitimacy through Buddhist patronage (Schober, 2011). The intersection of monastic support and authoritarian rule highlights the potential for manipulation of religious ideals for political ends (Schober, 2011). The rise of Buddhist nationalist movements, such as Ma Ba Tha, further demonstrates how the Dharmaraja narrative can be co-opted in ways that contradict traditional Buddhist teachings of tolerance and nonviolence (Walton & Hayward, 2014).

Critical Perspectives on the Contemporary Relevance of the Dharmaraja Ideal

The Dharmaraja ideal, a concept rooted in the intersection of Buddhist teachings and kingship, remains a significant cultural and religious reference in many Buddhist societies. However, its practical application in modern contexts is increasingly contested, particularly as the world transitions to secular governance and democratic institutions. In this era, the role of religious leaders, and by extension, the Dharmaraja, faces new challenges that stem from the complex interplay between political authority, religious duty, and human rights. The evolving political landscape, marked by democratization, globalization, and increasing secularism, raises critical questions about the utility and applicability of the Dharmaraja ideal in contemporary society.

The ideal of a righteous ruler governed by Dhamma faces particular challenges in modern democracies, where power is dispersed among elected officials rather than concentrated in a single, divinely ordained monarch (Keyes, 2016). In democratic systems, the authority of the ruler is subject to popular consent and is guided by laws and human rights frameworks, which often conflict with the absolute moral authority historically granted to the Dharmaraja. For instance, in Thailand, the king is constitutionally bound to uphold Buddhism, but democratic reforms have shifted the focus towards a more ceremonial role, with less direct involvement in governance. This shift has led scholars to question the relevance of the Dharmaraja model in a system that no longer centralizes the monarch's political power (Keyes, 2016).

Furthermore, scholars argue that modern interpretations of the Dharmaraja should evolve beyond its original monarchical framework and focus on ethical leadership rather than on the political authority of the ruler (Ura et al., 2012). The emphasis on social justice, environmental sustainability, and humanitarian governance aligns more closely with contemporary values, particularly in the context of the globalization of Buddhism. This shift is part of a broader trend where the focus is no longer on state-sponsored Buddhist patronage but on the individual and community-driven aspects of Buddhist leadership. Buddhist leaders today, in contrast to their royal counterparts of the past, often focus on promoting social harmony, addressing environmental concerns, and engaging in humanitarian work that aligns with Dhamma (Ura et al., 2012). In this way, the Dharmaraja ideal is being reframed as a call for ethical governance rather than a model of centralized political power.

The globalization of Buddhism has contributed to this shift by fostering a more decentralized approach to leadership. Buddhism is increasingly practiced outside the realm of state-sponsored systems, and Buddhist leaders are no longer exclusively associated with the political institutions of particular nations. As Buddhism spreads across different cultures, there is a growing emphasis on personal spiritual practice and community engagement rather than royal patronage or monarchical authority. Gombrich (1988) notes that this transformation reflects a broader trend in the modern world where the role of religious leadership is becoming less about institutional authority and more about ethical guidance at the individual and community levels. The Dharmaraja model, therefore, continues to hold symbolic significance but its practical influence is evolving in response to these shifts.

This transformation suggests that the Dharmaraja ideal, while still resonating with cultural and religious values, is evolving beyond its traditional monarchical framework. The modernization of Buddhist governance is focusing on ethical leadership, emphasizing that rulers—whether political or religious—should govern based on righteousness, compassion, and justice (Ura et al., 2012). In this regard, the Dharmaraja ideal is no longer about political power but about the ability of leaders to foster a just and harmonious society, grounded in the ethical teachings of Buddhism. The relevance of the Dharmaraja today lies not in its connection to political power, but in its universal values of righteousness, compassion, and ethical governance that transcend any specific political structure.

Conclusion

The Dharmaraja ideal, deeply embedded in Buddhist political philosophy, continues to offer valuable insights into the intersection of governance, ethics, and spirituality. Historically exemplified by Emperor Ashoka's reign, the Dharmaraja model represents a ruler who governs through the principles of Dhamma, aiming for social harmony, justice, and the welfare of his people. Despite its historical significance, the ideal's practical relevance in contemporary Buddhist societies is increasingly contested. The transition to secular governance, democratic institutions, and the rise of global Buddhism have led to significant reinterpretations of the Dharmaraja ideal. Rather than focusing on centralized political authority, the Dharmaraja concept is evolving into a broader call for ethical leadership that emphasizes social justice, humanitarian work, and compassionate governance in a non-monarchical framework.

Suggestions

As Buddhist societies continue to evolve, there is a pressing need to adapt the Dharmaraja model to the realities of modern governance. Rather than relying on a monarch's absolute authority, the ideal should focus on fostering ethical leadership in all levels of governance, including both secular and religious spheres. A possible modern interpretation could be the promotion of ethical principles in democratic and human rights-based frameworks. This would encourage leaders to apply Dhamma through social justice policies, environmental sustainability, and community-driven initiatives. Additionally, Buddhist monastic leaders could play a more active role in advocating for peace and social harmony, extending their

influence beyond traditional political structures. The relevance of the Dharmaraja could be strengthened by focusing on its universal values, encouraging leaders to integrate these ideals into modern governance systems to achieve a holistic vision of ethical and compassionate leadership.

Body of Knowledge

The Dharmaraja ideal, one of the most profound elements of Buddhist political thought, finds its historical precedent in the reign of Emperor Ashoka of the Mauryan Empire (r. 268–232 BCE). Initially known for his military conquests, Ashoka's transformation into a Buddhist ruler following the devastation of the Kalinga War is a pivotal moment in Buddhist history. Ashoka's remorse over the bloodshed he caused led to his embrace of Buddhism, resulting in a dramatic shift in his approach to governance. This shift is epitomized in the Ashokan Edicts, which reflect his commitment to rule based on Dhamma—emphasizing nonviolence (ahimsa), religious tolerance, and the promotion of social welfare (Strong, 1983; Thapar, 1997).

The Ashokan Edicts provide crucial insight into how Ashoka sought to apply Buddhist ethics to statecraft, advocating for moral righteousness and compassionate governance. For instance, Rock Edict XIII marks his renouncement of military aggression in favor of moral conquest (Dhamma-Vijaya)—a victory based on ethical principles rather than force (Thapar, 1997). Ashoka's patronage of Buddhism—through the construction of Buddhist monuments and the sponsorship of the Third Buddhist Council—further reinforced his role as the Dharmaraja (Guruge, 1993). His diplomatic efforts to spread Buddhism to distant regions such as Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia highlight his commitment to promoting Buddhism as an ethical system for all, not confined to the Mauryan Empire alone (Gombrich, 1988).

Nevertheless, the historical reality of Ashoka's reign is not without its critics. Some scholars contend that his approach to governance was not purely Buddhist but an adaptation of Mauryan political strategy, incorporating elements of Hindu and Jain teachings to foster inclusivity (Skilling, 2007). Furthermore, while Ashoka's Dhamma was influential, the absence of lasting political systems modeled after his reign in subsequent Indian dynasties raises questions about the long-term viability of the Dharmaraja concept in governance (Strong, 1983). Despite these criticisms, Ashoka remains an enduring symbol of the Dharmaraja ideal, illustrating how a

ruler's commitment to righteous governance and compassion can leave a lasting legacy on both religious and political spheres.

In contemporary Buddhist societies, the legacy of Emperor Ashoka continues to serve as a foundation for interpreting the role of Dharmaraja. Whether it is through the Thai monarchy's role in upholding Buddhism or Bhutan's Gross National Happiness philosophy, the Ashokan model of combining ethical leadership with governance serves as a template for leaders to follow in modern times. However, as global contexts evolve, so too must the application of Dharmaraja principles, from a monarchical ideal to a more inclusive, ethically grounded leadership that can flourish within democratic frameworks.

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