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Good Governance and Leadership in Buddhist Perspective

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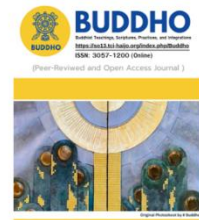
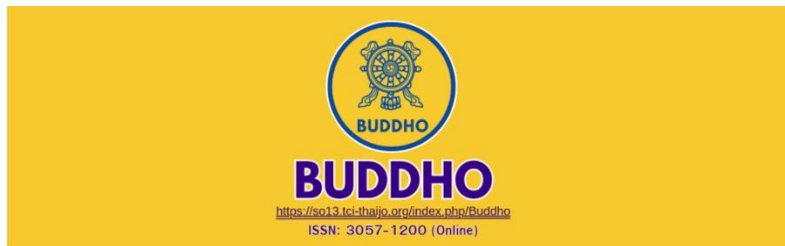


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Good Governance and Leadership in Buddhist Perspective

Sunisa Vitchayan*

Abstract

This article explores the concept of good governance and leadership through the lens of Buddhist philosophy. Good governance, traditionally defined in political and administrative contexts, can be enriched by Buddhist teachings that emphasize ethical conduct, compassion, mindfulness, and the pursuit of harmony within society. By examining the principles of Dhamma, including the notion of righteous leadership (Dhammic leadership), the article highlights how Buddhist ethics offer practical guidelines for leaders in both secular and spiritual spheres. The study further investigates the interplay between leadership and governance, emphasizing the importance of wisdom (*paññā*), ethical behavior (*sīla*), and mental discipline (*samādhi*) as integral components of effective leadership. By analyzing key Buddhist texts and contemporary interpretations, this work advocates for a leadership model that fosters integrity, justice, and sustainability, grounded in the broader Buddhist vision of societal well-being.

Keywords: Buddhist, Economics, Thailand, Sustainable

Introduction

Good governance and leadership are often framed within the context of modern political and organizational frameworks, yet the underlying ethical and philosophical principles that guide leadership in any form of society remain critically important (UNDP, 1997). In this regard, Buddhist teachings offer a

profound and relevant perspective on leadership and governance, emphasizing the role of moral integrity, compassion, and wisdom in fostering harmonious and just communities (Payutto, 1999). Rooted in the ancient texts of the Theravada and Mahayana traditions, the Buddhist approach to leadership transcends mere administrative function and provides a holistic model that integrates both spiritual and societal dimensions (Sivaraksa, 2000). The concept of good governance, in this view, is not limited to the effective management of resources or political structures but is intrinsically linked to the well-being of all members of society, prioritizing ethical leadership that promotes peace, justice, and collective welfare (Harris, 2014).

This article seeks to investigate Buddhist perspectives on good governance and leadership, examining how key principles such as the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, and the concept of righteous leadership (Dhammic leadership) inform modern discussions of governance (Acharashubho, 2025). By delving into the intersection between governance theory and Buddhist philosophy, this study aims to provide insights that are not only applicable to Buddhist communities but also to broader secular leadership models. Ultimately, the work asserts that Buddhist leadership, grounded in ethical conduct and mindfulness, offers a path towards more sustainable, just, and compassionate governance (Thanissaro, 2008).

Good Governance and Leadership Rooted in the Ancient Texts of the Theravada and Mahayana Traditions

Good governance and leadership, as outlined in both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhist traditions, offer profound insights into the ethical and philosophical dimensions of leadership, focusing on the moral integrity of leaders, the importance of compassion, and the collective welfare of society. While these ideals have been influential in Buddhist communities, their practical application and relevance to contemporary governance models require a more nuanced examination.

Theravada Buddhism and Leadership

The Theravada tradition, which is prominent in Southeast Asia, stresses the cultivation of wisdom (*paññā*), ethical conduct (*sīla*), and mental discipline (*samādhi*) as the core qualities of a good leader. The concept of Dhammic leadership, as articulated by Phra Payutto (1999), emphasizes that leaders must

embody the teachings of the Buddha, particularly the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, which guide individuals towards ethical living and the alleviation of suffering. According to Theravada teachings, the ruler's primary responsibility is to ensure the welfare of the people, which includes both material and spiritual well-being.

However, while these teachings advocate for a benevolent and virtuous leader, their practical application in a modern, pluralistic society raises important concerns. In traditional Theravada Buddhist societies, governance is often seen as an extension of spiritual practice, where rulers and religious institutions are intertwined. In the modern world, however, this connection between religion and governance can be problematic, particularly in secular, democratic societies where the separation of church and state is a foundational principle. The challenge, then, is how to adapt Buddhist leadership principles within a context that must accommodate diverse beliefs and values, without compromising the ethical foundations of governance.

Mahayana Buddhism and Leadership

Mahayana Buddhism, one of the two major branches of Buddhism, offers a profound and inclusive approach to leadership that is rooted in the bodhisattva ideal. This ideal emphasizes the aspiration to achieve enlightenment not for oneself alone but for the benefit of all sentient beings. The bodhisattva's path is characterized by compassion (*karuṇā*), wisdom (*prajñā*), and skillful means (*upāya*)—qualities that are essential for effective leadership. These principles have shaped Mahayana leadership philosophy, advocating for a leadership model that is participatory and focused on the collective welfare of society. Rather than concentrating solely on the leader's moral purity, Mahayana Buddhism highlights the shared responsibility of both leaders and followers to foster the well-being of the entire community.

The Bodhisattva Ideal and Leadership

In Mahayana thought, the bodhisattva is considered an enlightened being who has the power to transcend personal liberation in order to assist all sentient beings in their journey toward enlightenment (Gethin, 2008). This ideal shapes the leadership model in Mahayana Buddhism, where leadership is seen as an act of service. Leaders are not elevated above others but are rather seen as guides who

embody compassion and wisdom. This model promotes a participatory, inclusive approach to governance, where the welfare of the community as a whole is prioritized over the individual interests of the leader.

Leaders, in this framework, are tasked with the responsibility of guiding others not only towards material prosperity but also towards spiritual liberation. This aligns closely with the concept of skillful means (upāya)—the ability to adapt one's actions and teachings to the needs of others. Skillful means, therefore, encourages leaders to be flexible and sensitive to the particular circumstances of the people they lead. It suggests that leadership is not a one-size-fits-all process but involves constantly evolving strategies that are empathetic to the diverse needs of the community (Williams, 2009).

The Strengths of Mahayana Leadership

One of the core strengths of Mahayana Buddhist leadership is its emphasis on compassion and the interconnectedness of all beings. This vision of leadership seeks to eliminate the hierarchical and authoritarian structures typically associated with political leadership, offering instead a model based on mutual care and responsibility. Leaders, from this perspective, are not figures of authority or dominance but stewards of collective well-being, responsible for creating environments where every individual can flourish spiritually, emotionally, and socially. This view encourages leaders to practice humility, listening, and empathy in their decision-making processes.

Furthermore, the Mahayana emphasis on the Bodhisattva vow—the pledge to aid others in achieving enlightenment—suggests a profound ethical responsibility for leaders to act selflessly for the common good. This responsibility to alleviate the suffering of others resonates with contemporary ideals of social justice and the protection of the marginalized (Sivaraksa, 2000). In a world often focused on individual success and material gain, the Mahayana model of leadership offers an alternative vision where the welfare of all beings takes precedence, fostering a more inclusive and harmonious society.

The Challenges of Implementing Mahayana Leadership

Despite its strengths, the ideal of the bodhisattva leader presents certain challenges, particularly when it comes to translating spiritual ideals into practical leadership within modern governance systems. The expectation that a leader must

embody both spiritual and secular wisdom is a high bar to meet. In a rapidly changing world, political and economic considerations often overshadow spiritual virtues, and it becomes increasingly difficult to integrate wisdom and compassion into the daily workings of governance.

In the political and administrative realms, leadership often requires pragmatic solutions to complex issues such as inequality, corruption, and social unrest. These problems demand concrete, actionable steps that can be difficult to reconcile with the Mahayana ideals of non-attachment and non-violence. For instance, while Mahayana Buddhism advocates for peace and reconciliation, leaders in politically unstable regions may face situations where the use of force or strict measures becomes a necessary evil to maintain order and stability. The challenge for Buddhist leadership in these contexts is how to balance the pursuit of justice with the need for immediate, practical action (Harris, 2014).

Additionally, while Mahayana Buddhism encourages social justice and the welfare of all beings, it has traditionally been more inclined toward individual enlightenment and monastic communities, often sidelining the practicalities of governance in lay society. Historically, Mahayana teachings have placed a greater emphasis on personal liberation through meditation, prayer, and ethical conduct, which can sometimes detract from the more immediate needs of political or social governance. In many instances, the spiritual focus of Mahayana Buddhism may not provide clear guidance on how to resolve societal problems such as economic disparity or political corruption, which often require pragmatic, policy-oriented solutions (Acharashubho, 2025).

Summary, Mahayana Buddhism offers a rich and compelling model of leadership, rooted in compassion, wisdom, and skillful means. The bodhisattva ideal promotes a leadership style that is inclusive, empathetic, and dedicated to the welfare of all beings. However, the application of these ideals to contemporary governance systems presents significant challenges. While the spiritual and ethical virtues of Mahayana Buddhism are valuable in promoting a just and compassionate society, their integration into political leadership requires careful adaptation. Leaders must navigate the tension between spiritual ideals and the practical demands of governance, ensuring that the principles of Mahayana Buddhism remain relevant and effective in addressing the complex issues of modern societies.

Critique of the Buddhist Model of Governance

A critical concern regarding the application of Buddhist principles to governance is the tension between spiritual ideals and the demands of modern political leadership. Both Theravada and Mahayana traditions emphasize virtuous leadership, yet in contemporary societies, leaders often face situations that may require decisions based on political expediency rather than spiritual purity. For example, the principles of non-violence (ahimsa) and compassion may conflict with the need for forceful action in situations of war or political instability. While Buddhist ethics provide a moral framework for leadership, they may be insufficient in addressing the complex challenges faced by modern leaders, such as balancing individual rights with collective interests, managing political power, and navigating the demands of a globalized economy.

Furthermore, the notion of a "righteous leader" in Buddhism may unintentionally perpetuate an authoritarian model of leadership, where the leader is seen as a guiding figure who holds moral authority. This hierarchical view could conflict with more democratic and participatory models of leadership, which emphasize equality, transparency, and accountability. As governance models evolve towards greater inclusivity and citizen participation, the traditional Buddhist leadership model may need to be reinterpreted to align with the values of contemporary democracy.

The Buddhist model of governance, deeply rooted in both the Theravada and Mahayana traditions, emphasizes ethical leadership, compassion, wisdom, and non-violence. These virtues, derived from core Buddhist teachings, have shaped ideas of good governance for centuries, offering a framework that encourages moral integrity and social harmony. However, a critical concern arises when applying Buddhist principles to modern political leadership, where leaders face complex, multifaceted challenges that may require decisions based on political expediency rather than spiritual purity. This essay critiques the Buddhist model of governance by exploring the tension between spiritual ideals and the practical demands of modern governance, particularly in the context of balancing individual rights with collective interests, managing political power, and responding to the exigencies of a globalized world.

The Tension Between Spiritual Ideals and Political Expediency

One of the primary concerns when applying Buddhist principles to governance is the inherent tension between spiritual ideals and the pragmatic demands of political leadership. Buddhist ethics, particularly the principles of non-violence (ahimsa) and compassion (karuṇā), form the foundation of virtuous leadership. However, these principles may conflict with the realities of leadership in the modern world, where decisions often require a balancing act between maintaining peace and order, ensuring national security, and safeguarding the interests of the state (Harris, 2014).

For example, the principle of non-violence is central to Buddhist ethics, emphasizing the avoidance of harm to any sentient being. In a Buddhist framework, a ruler is expected to lead with compassion and to seek peaceful solutions in conflicts. However, in situations of war or political instability, the use of force may become necessary to protect citizens or maintain national sovereignty. This raises a fundamental issue: can Buddhist principles of non-violence be applied in situations that demand military intervention or forceful actions? Buddhist ethics, while promoting peace and non-harm, may not provide clear guidance in addressing situations where violence appears inevitable, such as in civil wars, international conflicts, or cases of systemic oppression (Sivaraksa, 2000).

Furthermore, modern political leaders are often faced with decisions that may require balancing the moral integrity advocated by Buddhist teachings with the practical needs of governance. In democratic societies, leaders must often make compromises to accommodate various political ideologies, economic interests, and social pressures. The Buddhist model of governance, which advocates for selfless leadership rooted in spiritual wisdom, may not always align with the political realities of governance in pluralistic societies, where the leader must account for the diverse beliefs and values of the population.

The Challenge of Balancing Individual Rights with Collective Interests

Another critique of the Buddhist model of governance lies in the challenge of balancing individual rights with collective interests. Buddhist teachings emphasize the importance of interconnectedness and the welfare of all beings, promoting a sense of collective responsibility for societal well-being. However, in the real world, the tension between individual freedoms and collective good often becomes a significant challenge for political leaders. While Buddhism calls for

compassion and care for all beings, it does not offer a comprehensive framework for resolving the conflicts that arise when the rights of individuals clash with the needs of society as a whole.

In contemporary governance, leaders must navigate the tension between individual liberties and the broader social goals of stability, equality, and justice. For instance, while the Buddhist ideal of leadership promotes the welfare of all beings, modern political leaders often face situations where policies aimed at protecting the majority may infringe on the rights of minority groups. In some cases, the pursuit of collective welfare may require restrictive measures, such as limiting freedoms in the name of national security, economic stability, or public health. Buddhist principles, with their strong emphasis on individual moral responsibility, may not provide sufficient tools for resolving these complex moral dilemmas, leaving leaders to rely on secular ethics and political frameworks when making decisions (Acharashubho, 2025).

Political Power and Governance in a Globalized World

Another area of critique relates to how the Buddhist model of governance addresses the management of political power in a globalized world. In Buddhist teachings, political leadership is often seen as a form of service to the community, with leaders expected to act selflessly and with compassion for all. However, this ideal can become difficult to implement when confronted with the competitive, often adversarial nature of modern global politics. The power dynamics in international relations often require leaders to make strategic alliances, engage in negotiations, or even enter conflicts, which may contradict Buddhist ideals of cooperation, peace, and non-violence (Gethin, 2008).

The Buddhist approach to governance also faces challenges in addressing issues such as economic inequality, environmental degradation, and global justice. While Buddhist ethics emphasize simplicity, non-attachment, and the alleviation of suffering, they do not offer concrete solutions to the globalized economic system that promotes materialism, consumerism, and environmental exploitation. In today's interconnected world, leaders must address pressing global issues such as climate change, economic inequality, and migration, which often require collaboration across national borders, as well as policies that may be at odds with Buddhist ideals of moderation and non-attachment to wealth and power (Sivaraksa, 2000).

While the Buddhist model of governance offers valuable insights into ethical leadership, compassion, and social harmony, its application in the modern world presents significant challenges. The tension between spiritual ideals and the pragmatic demands of political leadership raises critical questions about the feasibility of implementing Buddhist principles in contemporary governance. The complexity of balancing individual rights with collective interests, managing political power in a globalized world, and responding to the exigencies of modern governance underscores the limitations of the Buddhist model in addressing the multifaceted issues faced by today's leaders. Ultimately, while Buddhist ethics provide a moral framework for leadership, they must be integrated with other secular political and ethical systems to effectively guide governance in the modern world.

Conclusion

While the ancient texts of the Theravada and Mahayana traditions provide valuable insights into the ethical and moral qualities of leadership, the practical application of these teachings in modern governance requires careful adaptation. The emphasis on wisdom, ethical conduct, and compassion remains relevant, but there must be a critical engagement with how these principles can coexist with the demands of modern political systems. The challenge is not only in translating Buddhist values into practical governance but also in ensuring that such leadership models contribute to the promotion of justice, equality, and social harmony in increasingly diverse and complex societies.

Suggestions

Holistic Integration of Buddhist Principles in Governance

To adapt Buddhist principles effectively within modern governance, there must be an ongoing dialogue between spiritual ideals and secular realities. Leaders should be educated in the importance of ethical conduct, compassion, and mindfulness, not only for personal growth but as a framework for making governance decisions. These principles can be integrated into modern systems by encouraging leaders to practice mindfulness, which aids in thoughtful decision-making and promotes a more ethical approach to leadership. Moreover, creating

spaces for reflection on these teachings within governance structures could promote a culture of ethical responsibility.

Fostering Interconnected Leadership Models

The traditional hierarchical leadership model, which often places the leader at the top of an authority pyramid, could be redefined in light of Buddhist principles of interconnectedness and the bodhisattva ideal. A leadership style that emphasizes participation, collaboration, and shared responsibility would allow leaders to foster a collective spirit within their communities. Democratic models could benefit from this by ensuring that leadership remains accountable to the people and nurtures the welfare of all citizens. This can also be achieved by promoting transparent and inclusive decision-making processes, which take into account diverse viewpoints and experiences.

Body of Knowledge

Buddhist leadership principles, drawn from both the Theravada and Mahayana traditions, offer valuable insights into how ethical leadership can be realized in modern governance systems. These principles, grounded in compassion, wisdom, and mindfulness, challenge conventional models of leadership and governance. However, when applied to modern political systems, they bring to light both profound strengths and significant challenges. The Theravada tradition emphasizes the cultivation of wisdom, ethical conduct, and mental discipline, offering a strong moral foundation for leadership. In practice, however, the connection between Buddhist leadership and governance in secular societies poses challenges. In contemporary, pluralistic societies, where religion and governance are often separate, the application of Buddhist principles must be adapted to respect diverse beliefs while still upholding the values of ethical governance.

Mahayana Buddhism provides an inclusive approach to leadership, focusing on the bodhisattva ideal, which prioritizes the welfare of all beings over personal gain. This participatory model of leadership advocates for empathy, compassion, and skillful means, where leaders serve as guides for the well-being of their communities. The bodhisattva's commitment to alleviating suffering resonates deeply with contemporary concerns for social justice, but the application of these principles to governance presents certain challenges. The expectation of spiritual and secular wisdom in leadership can sometimes conflict with the immediate needs

of political decision-making, particularly in times of crisis. Moreover, in addressing global issues such as inequality, climate change, and conflict, Buddhist leadership models offer valuable ethical frameworks but often lack concrete policy solutions. The Buddhist ideal of non-attachment and simplicity contrasts with the materialistic realities of global politics, which often prioritize economic growth, national interests, and security. Leaders must navigate these tensions, finding ways to integrate Buddhist principles into the practical demands of governance without sacrificing ethical integrity.

The core strengths of Buddhist leadership lie in its emphasis on compassion, wisdom, and service. Yet, to effectively apply these principles in modern governance, a deeper understanding of the intersection between spiritual ideals and political expediency is needed. Buddhist leadership can play a transformative role in shaping more compassionate, just, and sustainable governance models, but it must be flexible enough to address the complexities of contemporary governance.

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